

A detailed illustration of a young woman with long, flowing silver hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a dark, gothic-style dress with intricate silver armor and a large red bow at the collar. She holds a large, ornate sword with a dark hilt and a silver guard. The background is a soft, light purple and pink gradient.

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUSTRATION
CIERRA

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

II





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AYAMINE

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Characters

Kingdom of Fernest



**Ashton
Senefelder**

Discovering his potential as a military tactician.
A quick thinker.



**Olivia
Valedstorm**

A girl raised by a god of death.
Innocent and full of curiosity.



**Otto
Steiner**

Paul's aide.
Often ends up the
victim of Olivia's whims.



**Paul
von Baltza**

The old general at the head of
the Seventh Legion. Though known as
the God of the Battlefield, he has
a soft spot for Olivia.



**Claudia
Jung**

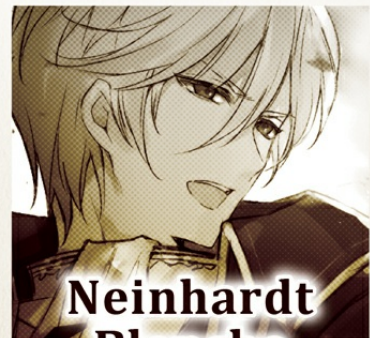
A proud knight who accompanies
Olivia as her aide.

**Alphonse
sem Gallmond**

The King of Fernest.

**Cornelius
vim Groening**

The Supreme Commander of the First Legion.



**Neinhardt
Blanche**

Aide in the First Legion
and Claudia's Cousin.

Asvelt Empire



**Rosenmarie
von Berlietta**

One of the empire's three generals.
She commands the Crimson Knights.

Felix von Sieger

One of the empire's three generals.
He commands the Azure Knights.

Gladden von Hildesheimer

One of the empire's three generals.
He commands the Helios Knights.

Darmés Guski

Imperial Chancellor.
The emperor trusts him absolutely.

Holy Land of Mekia



**Sofitia
Hell Mekia**

She is seventh in the line of Seraphs,
the rulers of Mekia.



Amelia Strast

A Thousand-Wing in Mekia's army,
the Winged Crusaders.

Others

Z

The god of death that took in Olivia and raised her.
Disappeared one day without warning.

Xenia

Another god of death who works through Darmés...?



Death's Daughter
and the Ebony Blade

II

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Illust. **Cierra**

Prologue: The Second Legion Was Alone

The Central Front in the Kingdom of Fernest

Two small nations lay in the center of the continent of Duvedirica—the Kingdom of Swaran, and the Principality of Stonia. The central front ran along their border with the Asvelt Empire, and right now it was there that the fiercest fighting raged. There, the impenetrable Kier Fortress had fallen. There, those who remained after the annihilation of the Fifth Legion fought on against all odds.

“There’s been an urgent message from the capital.”

A man looking through a spyglass lowered it with a sigh. He knew from the speaker’s clipped tone that this wasn’t news he’d welcome. News from the capital only ever meant trouble, as far as he was concerned. “I suppose you have to tell me?” he asked reluctantly.

“O-Of course I do, ser!” came the enraged reply. “How can you even—?!”

“Yes, I know. You don’t have to yell...” He returned the spyglass to the holster at his hip, and turned to face Colonel Lise Prussie, whose eyebrows were furrowed in a sharp vee. When he nodded for her to speak, however, her expression became sorrowful.

“The Third and Fourth Legions were destroyed in battle on the northern front. Lieutenant Generals Latz Smythe and Lindt Barthes were both killed in the fighting.”

“There’s no chance the report is mistaken?” The question was a last, vain attempt at hope, but Lise shook her head listlessly. Memories welled up within him of his youth and the time the three of them had spent together at the military academy, all the antics they’d gotten up to... The good old days.

“Very well,” he said. “Latz and Lindt are dead...” He observed the shocked faces of his officers as he pulled out a bent cigarette and lit it. He wasn’t usually

a religious man, but now he offered up a silent prayer for the souls of his fallen friends.

The man's name was Blood Enfield. He commanded the Second Legion—the Royal Army's last hope for defending the central front.

"I'm afraid that's not all, ser," said Lise. Whatever it was, she seemed reluctant to broach the subject. Blood ran his fingers through his messy hair, gesturing for her to continue. Knowing bad news was coming without knowing what it contained was its own kind of torment.

"Lieutenant General, your orders are to keep the northern imperial army at bay while holding the line of battle," said Lise. Blood stared at her, wondering if after long years of military service his hearing had started to go.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. Could you repeat that for me?"

"Lieutenant General, your orders are to keep the Northern Division of the Imperial Army at bay while holding the line of battle," Lise said, repeating the statement to the letter with her usual precision. His ears were working properly, then. Blood slowly looked up towards the expanse of empty blue sky above them. A number of gray birds soared gracefully through the air, as though mocking the humans and their wars below. Were this not a battleground, Blood thought, it would have been a perfect spot to lie down and doze in the grass.

"I see," he said at last. "What a pain in the ass... What do you say we just run away instead?"

"My lord!" exclaimed Lise with such ferocity that Blood shrank back from her, but he wasn't finished.

"No, listen here. This doesn't make any sense. We've got our hands full just holding the battle line, but now the orders from on high say we have to repel attacks from the north on top of that? Come on, Colonel, surely you must see how ludicrous this is!"

"I... I don't..." Lise started, then faltered and looked down. She didn't have a counterargument, then. If the imperial army did advance south towards the central front after their victory against Latz and Lindt, they would surround the

Second Legion, and not long after that, Blood would almost certainly find himself following his old friends to the afterlife. He pictured the two of them coming to meet him, scratching their heads apologetically. The whole thing was absurd. He had no intention of sitting back and waiting for an imperial blade to cut him down, and he balked at leading the Second Legion into certain death. When he suggested running away, he was more than halfway serious—orders from higher up be damned.

Now, what's the best escape route... he mused, drawing a rough map in his mind. As he did so, his eyes met Lise's. There was a pause as she stared at him like she was waiting for him to say something.

"Colonel, if you've got something to say, spit it out! Chop, chop!"

"I wish you wouldn't let your ill temper show so plainly, ser. I forgot to mention one thing. The Seventh Legion defeated an imperial army of fifty thousand soldiers at the Plains of Ilys and went on to successfully recapture Fort Caspar."

"What?! You're certain of that?" demanded Blood. For the first time in a long while, Lise smiled.

"I am, ser. By all accounts, it was an overwhelming victory."

"A victory..." It had been so long since he'd heard it, Blood had almost forgotten the word. And an *overwhelming* victory at that. Their first since the fall of Kier Fortress. Lise went on to report that less than ten of their soldiers had been lost in the battle at Fort Caspar.

"Hah! Good old Paul!" cried Blood, clapping a fist in his opposite hand. "Pulling off a miracle like that... It's not for nothing they call him the God of the Battlefield, eh?" He paused as something occurred to him. "Hold on, that means..." He trailed off, rubbing his chin, then ordered Lise to hurry and get out a map of southern Fernest. He snatched it from her hands and spread it out on the table as soon as she brought it.

"If we pull our defenses back to here..." Lise watched in silence as Blood's eyes darted to and fro across the map. She knew not to interrupt him when he got like this. He'd had an idea—good or bad, she couldn't yet tell—and was thinking hard.

“Yes, that should work.” Blood looked up from the map at last, his eyes bright as he took a drag on his cigarette.

“You have an idea, my lord? Would you by any chance care to share it with me?” Lise asked, her gaze fixed on him.

“Yes, please tell us, ser!” chorused the other officers in the room. They were watching him too, eyes full of expectation.

“Eh? Right, yes. Well, the thrust of it is that we get the Seventh Legion to deal with the empire’s northern forces. If we want to get out of this alive, it’s that or run,” said Blood. His tone left no room for argument, but most of the officers began to look uneasy, like they wanted to interject. Lise also appeared unconvinced.

“You want to call the Seventh Legion, ser? Not the Sixth?” she asked, frowning.

“The Sixth Legion? That won’t work.” Blood explained how the Sixth Legion, after regrouping following their defeat at the hands of the Steel Chargers, were now defending Fort Peshitta. Lise turned red with embarrassment.

“You’re right, ser. I totally forgot.”

“Even if they could mobilize, I don’t want to rely on Lieutenant General Sara if I can help it. I can’t stand that birdbrained princess.” Sara’s vacuous smile appeared in his mind’s eye.

“Er, yes. We all have people we don’t get along with, I’m sure,” said Lise, brushing this aside. “Anyway, you’re right, my lord, we can’t call on the Sixth Legion. But surely this is asking too much of the Seventh Legion, as well.” The other officers all nodded in agreement with her.

“You think so?” said Blood, confused at her certainty. He genuinely couldn’t fathom her reasoning and had asked the question in earnest, but Lise looked exasperated.

“Well, ser,” she began, as though explaining something extremely obvious. “While the Seventh Legion may have taken back Fort Caspar, they still have Kier Fortress to worry about in the north.”

“What does that matter?”

“It matters because it means the Seventh Legion has to be very careful about leaving Fort Caspar,” said Lise, pointing with a slender finger to where Kier Fortress and Fort Caspar were marked on the map as she spoke. Her explanation went on, breaking down in fine detail all the reasons that the Seventh Legion could not, under any circumstances, leave Fort Caspar. When she’d finished, however, Blood only let out a defiant laugh.

“You’re wrong. It’s quite the opposite, in fact. The Seventh Legion has set itself free,” he said.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, ser,” said Lise, confusion clouding her azure eyes.

“What’s the greatest advantage they get from holding Fort Caspar? It allows them to build a strong defensive line against Kier Fortress.”

“A defensive line?”

“That’s right. The terrain in that region is complex—by making effective use of that, even a small force can hold off a much greater army. Provided they have a competent commander, of course,” he added. War was cruel, and just having the advantage of terrain wasn’t enough to guarantee you could hold off a large army. One needed a commander who knew how to coordinate their troops to best utilize that terrain to their advantage. That was what they needed here. Lise took all this in, then looked back down at the map.

“I see,” she said under her breath. “They can use the rivers to the east and west like moats, and those sheer cliffs to the south already give them natural defenses. The road is narrow too—not good for moving a large army. It is a highly defensible location, no doubt about that. Though as you say, my lord, only if they have a competent commander.”

Her glasses threatened to slip down several times as she spoke; she pushed them back up her nose. Finally, she looked up, satisfied.

That was quick, thought Blood as he watched Lise run her fingers through her hair like she was trying to shake dirt out of it. *She clearly earned her spot at the top in her class at the Royal Military Academy. Now if only she could be a bit*

more flexible...

“I’m pretty sure that old bastard Hermann is in the Seventh Legion. Give him ten thousand soldiers and the south will be safe.”

“I agree, ser. Major General Hermann is a brilliant defensive commander. He could certainly hold off a great army.”

“Right? And that means there’s no need for the Seventh Legion to stay holed up in Galia Fortress, which means—”

“Which means the Seventh Legion can move freely,” Lise finished his sentence for him. Blood nodded with a wry smile.

“That about sums it up.”

“Understood, ser. In that case, we’d better send a rider to the capital at once,” said Lise, rising quickly before striding from the room. Blood watched her go, putting another cigarette in his mouth. Truthfully, he wanted to reach out to the First Legion, who could move at any time. The only reason he hadn’t suggested it was because he couldn’t see King Alfonse permitting it. With the Third and Fourth Legions now following the Fifth in defeat, the empire would almost certainly be planning a strike against Fernest’s heart—on the royal capital of Fis. Sending the First Legion out to reinforce the others was a bold move, and Blood didn’t rate Alfonse as the sort of man who could make it.

That being said, I’m not keen on racking up debts to the Seventh Legion. Old Paul scares the hell out of me. Blood sighed, and blew out a mouthful of smoke. It drifted skywards along with the dust.

Chapter One: The Girl They Called Hero; The Girl They Called Monster

I

Tempus Fugit 999

The leaves grew darker and more vibrant, leaving behind the graceful palette of early spring as summer drew near in the capital. Around this time, the city should have been at its most vibrant, alive with trade and commerce.

“I heard our army in the north got done in by the empire.”

“Eh? Doesn’t that mean they’ll be coming here soon?”

“We’ve got the invincible General Cornelius and his First Legion here, so I reckon we’ll be all right. Still...”

“Hey, don’t be so sure. He might do a runner and abandon us here.”

The citizens of the capital all knew of how the Third and Fourth Legions, riding on the wings of their victory at the Battle of Berchel, had then marched on the empire itself. So the news of their defeat had come as a heavy blow. Along with this came the realization that northern Fernest had fallen under imperial control. The shrewder merchants saw this, decided there was no hope for Fis, and one after another departed the city, making for the jewel of the south—the United City-States of Sutherland. Now, getting enough food to make it through each day was a matter of life and death for the people of Fis. As the number of merchants shrank, so too did the flow of supplies into the city.

Of course, the royal capital had storehouses to provide for the populace in such times, and the First Legion was constantly on watch, so there was none of the rioting and thievery that had broken out in other regions. Even so, none could fail to see that as the days went by, things were only getting worse.

The Audience Chamber in Leticia Castle, Fis

When the news arrived that Fort Caspar had been won, King Alfonse sem Galmond of Fernest was halfway through his meal. Despite this, he leapt to his feet in an ecstatic dance. It wasn't just that this was their first victory in who knew how long. He felt sure that this could only add to the momentum they needed to make a move on Kier Fortress. Only two months later, however, the situation had turned against them once more. Upon hearing of the Third and Fourth Legion's defeat, Alfonse plunged into an abyss of despair. Without the Third and Fourth Legions ready for battle, retaking Kier Fortress was off the table. It would be the height of foolishness to dispatch the First Legion in such circumstances.

And then the bad news just kept coming. When the Royce Company, merchants who had maintained intimate ties with the royal family for generations, vanished from the capital without a trace, Alfonse felt as though the ground beneath his feet was crumbling away. They might as well have declared to his face that Fernest was finished.

The light of the setting sun was fading, just like any hope for Fernest's future, staining the silent audience chamber vermilion red. Not even the ever-present king's guard were standing watch today.

Has it already been four years since this war began? It's so much quieter here than it used to be... thought Cornelius. He had come seeking an audience with Alfonse. He looked over at the dais, set in a deep recess at the other end of the room, and smiled sadly. Now, there were none of the people who had once come every day seeking the king's ear. The great doors carved with lions hardly opened at all. The chamber was as spotless as ever, but now all the grand ornaments and furnishings seemed to suck the warmth from the room. As he indulged this lapse into sentimentality, Cornelius heard the faint sound of several sets of footsteps from the door at the very back of the chamber. Amongst the perfect rhythm of the others, one of their number dragged their feet. Cornelius knew those footsteps well.

Well, well. His Majesty is here at last... Cornelius promptly knelt to show his respect. Moments later, the doors opened and Alfonse appeared, several of his king's guard in tow. He glanced at Cornelius, then collapsed heavily onto the

throne.

“What are we to do then, old man? I... I confess I am at an utter loss,” said Alfonse with a heavy sigh. “Not that I ever know what I ought to do...” His voice was little more than a feeble whine, devoid of any spirit, and his face was paler than candle wax. The king’s attendants had told Cornelius how Alfonse only picked at this food, and he had undoubtedly lost a great deal of weight. It was hard to believe the frail man before him was the King of Fernest, and the thought pained him.

“Now, Your Majesty, you mustn’t be so gloomy!” Cornelius said, trying to rouse him. “We have driven the imperial army from the south, and are poised to strike back in the north! With your leave, my king, I will lead the First Legion out to the northern front myself.”

“N-No!” cried Alfonse, his voice ragged. “That, I shall never allow. The First Legion is to defend the capital—the central lands. That’s all I have to say on that!” At the king’s vehement rejection, Cornelius sighed, his shoulders slumping. The royal capital of Fis sat at the heart of the central lands and had enjoyed generations of prosperity as a hub of trade. These lands were well traveled, far more so than the northern and southern regions, and with those people came money and goods. After their many defeats, there were far fewer travelers than in the past, but even now the central lands were vital in supporting the kingdom. Alfonse had next to no aptitude for military affairs, but he knew his way around finance. Cornelius, therefore, opted not to push any further for the mobilization of the First Legion. Alfonse’s denial this time carried far more weight than it had when they’d been discussing Fort Caspar.

“Does that mean, Your Majesty, that you will leave the defense of the central front to the Second Legion alone? If the imperial forces in the north come south, the Second Legion will be surrounded and wiped out.”

“I know!” snapped Alfonse. “It is a horrible situation. Even I’ve grasped that much. But there’s nothing more we can do...” He leaned forward, cradling his face in his hands. Cornelius was at a loss for words. He had stood beside Alfonse, watching over him since the king’s youth, but he had never seen him in such a pitiful state before. He was also reassured, however, to hear that Alfonse was taking the plight of the Second Legion seriously.

“Your Majesty, the Second Legion has requested the aid of the Seventh Legion in handling the imperial forces in the north. What say you?” demanded Cornelius. Alfonse looked up, his perfectly shaped eyebrows knitting together in surprise.

“The Seventh Legion...? Aren’t they defending Fort Caspar? And Galia Fortress?”

“You need not worry about that, Your Majesty. The Seventh Legion has established a rock-solid line of defense around Fort Caspar and can move without impediment,” replied Cornelius. Alfonse peered at him suspiciously.

“You aren’t trying to trick me?” he asked.

“My king, I would not dream of engaging in such duplicity,” said Cornelius, meeting the king’s gaze directly so as to expel all doubt. Alfonse continued to press him on what would happen if the imperial army marched from Kier Fortress. He seemed afraid that after their hard-won victory, Fort Caspar might be stolen from them again. Such anxiety was deplorable in a monarch, but as he was in charge of the military, Cornelius also knew he should bear the blame for inciting it.

“The Seventh Legion has a major general with a proven record in defensive strategy protecting Fort Caspar. The terrain around the fort is also in our favor. Even if the empire sends a great army against them, they should be able to repel it,” Cornelius answered with confidence. Alfonse’s eyelids drooped closed. Time passed. Five minutes, or was it ten? Or longer? Cornelius waited patiently until at last, Alfonse slowly opened his eyes again and heaved a deep sigh.

“Very well. I shall trust you on this, old man. You have my leave to send the Seventh Legion to the Second Legion’s aid. The First Legion stays here in the capital, for the defense of the central lands. Will that do?”

“Indeed, it shall! I am very much obliged to you, Your Majesty.”

“We can’t have you threatening to retire again, after all,” said Alfonse, his voice tinged with sarcasm. He rose, looking exhausted, then left the audience chamber. As his footsteps died away, the room sank once more into silence. Left alone, Cornelius sighed and stood up slowly.

I've done all I can do for them at my age... Now it's up to the Seventh Legion—to Paul—to do the rest...

II

The War Room at Galia Fortress

Paul, who had been promoted to the rank of general following the victory at the Plains of Ilys, summoned his commissioned officers to a war council. Orders had arrived from King Alfonse that they were to intercept the northern imperial army that had defeated the Third and Fourth Legions. Amongst those assembled were Olivia, who had received an accelerated promotion of three ranks to become a major, and Claudia, who had been promoted by two ranks and was now a second lieutenant. A nervous young man sat fidgeting beside them. Following his debut as tactical advisor at Fort Caspar, he had received an abrupt promotion from private second class, and was now Warrant Officer Ashton.

“As you all know, His Majesty has ordered us to intercept the imperial army in the north,” said Senior Colonel Otto, freshly promoted just like the others. The officers all nodded with rapt attention, with the exception of Olivia, who propped her cheek on her hand and stared up at the ceiling, looking bored. In what had practically become a conditioned reflex, Otto felt his fist trembling, but he restrained himself. He went through his explanation of the current state of the war systematically, then took comments from the officers. One man raised his hand to speak. It was Major General Osmund Chrysler, who had commanded the right flank at the Battle of Ilys.

“The Second Legion is clearly in peril, so the way I see it, we have no time to lose. I propose that I take three thousand soldiers and go there at once. I can report back on the situation on the ground as well,” he said. The officers, on the whole, responded in one of two ways to this. Some nodded, finding nothing to object to, while others looked ambivalent. The reaction of the first group was simple enough to understand, but Otto suspected the latter group saw through to the hunger for glory that lay behind Osmund’s proposal—that Osmund wanted glory was a simple fact. He had found little at the Battle of Ilys, and his

eagerness for the assault on Fort Caspar had been plain to all until Olivia and the detached force went and took the fort before he arrived. That the common-born Hermann, who had commanded the left flank, had been promoted to lieutenant general only added fuel to the fire of his discontentment.

“My lord, your thoughts?” said Otto, directing his question at Paul, who sat beside him. He himself thought the suggestion left a lot to be desired. They had scouts to send ahead. Hunger for glory he sympathized with, but their first order of business was crushing the enemy vanguard that would advance on the central lands. He was, of course, also thinking ahead to retaking the north, and didn’t want to risk it, however small, of losing more soldiers that came with dividing their forces.

“We have scouts we can send to get a look at the situation, Major General Osmund. I don’t see the point in dividing our forces,” said Paul, who had clearly been thinking along the same lines. Otto voiced his agreement, but at this Osmund leapt to his feet.

“Lord Paul, the imperial army may already be marching south as we speak!” he protested. “Our greatest enemy, in my humble opinion, is time—time that we cannot waste loitering about waiting for scouts to bring back information. If we do not make haste, the Second Legion will be wiped out!”

“You may just have a point there, Major General,” replied Paul thoughtfully. Now the majority of officers were nodding in agreement. The only exceptions were Olivia, who was loudly ordering another cup of tea, and Claudia and Ashton, who sat on either side of her, looking at the ground in embarrassment.

“What do you think, Major Olivia?”

“Me, ser? I like to get a look at my enemy before I make plans,” said Olivia, unreservedly spooning precious sugar into her new cup of tea. She took a sip, savoring it. Shaking his head, Otto turned to Ashton on her right, who was hiding his face.

“And you, Warrant Officer Ashton?”

“Y-Yes, ser! I... I don’t believe an advance force is necessary, ser!” he said, only for his face to fall like he regretted the words. The other officers were all looking at him now, doubt written plain on their faces.

That reaction isn't unjustified, thought Otto. Whether we send a scouting party or let Major General Osmund go ahead, the assumption is that we're going to do some sort of reconnaissance. Now here comes the absurd suggestion that reconnaissance isn't necessary at all.

Osmund turned to Ashton, his eyebrows raised. "I heard all about your success at Fort Caspar. A truly superb strategy—I'd never have come up with it myself. As such, I'm dying to know just what it is you don't like about my plan. Care to share the reason? For my future reference," he said. The room filled with a crackling tension. Ashton, the author of this atmosphere, looked pleadingly at Otto, who, with a barely perceptible smile, nodded at him. He himself was intrigued to hear what the sorry-looking young man had to say. Ashton's shoulders slumped and an expression of woe came onto his face as he haltingly began his explanation.

The day after the war council, Major General Osmund took three thousand cavalry and departed from Galia Fortress for the Emaleid Citadel, the greatest city in the north of Fernest. If the northern imperial forces came south towards central Fernest, they would likely try and take Emaleid to make it their base of operations. In the end, Ashton's plan had been vetoed, and Osmund's officially approved. Olivia was to set off with another cavalry unit as the second company in a week's time, and the main force would march two weeks after that.

Within the walls of Galia Fortress everyone was busy with preparation for the next battle. Claudia was walking down a corridor with a stack of military documents in one hand when she saw Olivia coming out of the archive room.

What in the world was she doing? It's not like there are any books that the major would like... thought Claudia. She called out to Olivia, and the other girl turned slowly back to her.

"Oh, Claudia."

"You look quite miserable, ser. Are you unwell?" she asked. Usually a bundle of energy, right now Olivia looked rather downtrodden.

"No, I'm fine. I was just heading to the mess hall."

"Well, then what's the matter?" Outside of where food was concerned, Claudia had rarely seen Olivia so dispirited.

“I just haven’t been able to find any clues...” said Olivia with a weak smile. Now Claudia came to think of it, lately Olivia had been disappearing from time to time. She’d assumed she’d just been frequenting the mess hall, but now it seemed she was trying to find something.

“I could help if you like, ser,” Claudia offered. Whatever Olivia was hunting for, two sets of eyes were surely better than one. Olivia clapped her lightly on the shoulder.

“Okay, I’ll call you next time. For now, let’s go have lunch,” she said. Despite Olivia’s words, however, Claudia couldn’t help but feel that her offer had been rejected.

Oh well. So long as she’s not sick, it’s probably nothing to worry about, Claudia reasoned to herself. *Just because I’m her aide doesn’t mean I need to go prying into her private business.* She followed Olivia to the mess hall.

When they arrived, they found Ashton sitting at a table right at the back of the hall. He was scowling as he ate his soup.

That’s right, I meant to ask him about what he said yesterday, thought Claudia. She accepted a full plate of bread and soup from one of the women bustling about the kitchen, then went and plonked herself down in front of Ashton.

“Hey, what was all that about yesterday? Talk about your imagination running away with you—I was worried you might be delusional!” Ashton stopped abruptly in the process of raising another spoonful of soup, and looked up apprehensively at Claudia. He wore a guilty expression like a child caught playing a prank.

“I just said what I thought at the time. When you put it like that, though, maybe I did get carried away...”

“Weawy? ’thounded pothible to me,” said Olivia, coming to Ashton’s defense through a mouthful of bread. She had arrived a little after Claudia and sat down next to her.

“Major, it’s poor manners to speak with your mouth full,” Claudia scolded her gently, and Olivia nodded. There was something so sisterly about this exchange

that Ashton couldn't help but smile. Seeing them side by side, golden-haired Claudia and silver-haired Olivia, he was suddenly reminded of the gold and silver lions on the royal flag. The cup on the table between them was then, of course, the chalice.

He allowed himself to be entertained by the foolish image until Olivia finished her mouthful and said, "It sounded possible to me. Ashton's right—don't you think the timing's too perfect? Taking out the Third and Fourth Legions just two months after the Seventh Legion takes back Fort Caspar and the south—that could definitely be meant to provoke us."

Why didn't you say that at the war council, then? thought Claudia, then remembered Olivia entirely engrossed in her cup of tea and worked out the answer herself.

"I suppose; it just seems like too much of a leap. Why would the northern imperial army want to lure the Seventh Legion out?"

This is what Ashton had said the previous day:

"I believe the imperial forces deployed in the north may be lying in wait for the Seventh Legion. If so, it is my humble opinion that we shouldn't rush to confront them." When he began, the majority of the other officers were regarding him with sympathy. Paul and Otto listened without interrupting until he was finished, but to the extent that they paid any heed to their surroundings, their expressions were troubled.

Other officers, even Osmund himself, wore condescending smiles. One of them sneered, "Major Olivia's pet tactician has some really *unique* ideas." As this amounted to a slight against Olivia as well, Claudia grew genuinely angry. She couldn't make any retort when the offender was a major general, however, so she cursed him silently instead. In the warped world of the military, rank was everything. If your commanding officer said white was black, you agreed without question. Even setting the slight aside, though, Ashton's suggestion had really gone too far. Claudia had thought she'd more or less understood the young man, but she had neither the evidence nor the courage to back him up on this.

In the mess hall the following day, she watched him, thinking.

And yet the major thought what he said was reasonable... Perhaps I'm still not giving Ashton enough credit for his tactical abilities.

"Um, anyway, it's not like I had any proof of what I said, and it got rejected, so there's no point stewing over it now," Ashton said, trying to sound disinterested before going back to eating his soup in an attempt to avoid Claudia's gaze. She decided he needed a talking-to.

"You bonehead! If you can't stand by your opinions, don't bring them up in the first place!"

"B-But... When the ogr—Senior Colonel Otto, I mean—asked me all of a sudden, I panicked..." said Ashton, shrinking back from her. Claudia sighed deeply. She understood that he was nervous as a freshly commissioned officer, but he'd be no use if he held on to this foot soldier mentality forever.

"What did you think would happen at a war council? Honestly. Are you Major Olivia's tactician or not? You need to toughen up!"

Olivia giggled. "Ashton's in trouble..." she said, with a friendly smile at Ashton.

"You li—!" he began, then broke off, his shoulders slumping. "Yes, ser. My apologies."

"Don't worry about it," said Olivia comfortingly, rubbing his back. Claudia was quietly amused to see Olivia acting like an older sister trying to cheer up her little brother, even though she was pretty sure Ashton was four years the elder.

"You can wipe that smile off your face too, Major," she said, smiling broadly at Olivia. "Today I'm going to have you decide on a house name, and I'd appreciate your cooperation instead of trying to wriggle your way out of doing it."

They'd spent four whole hours last time, as well as two hours the time before that, trying to find a name. Olivia looked away, and said in a whisper, "I don't need any house name. I never asked to be made nobility or anything and I don't want to be. What's wrong with just 'Olivia'? It's a good name."

"That won't do, ser. You've been honored as a knight of the kingdom, and that means you take on the name of a noble house. Also, Senior Colonel Otto told you to hurry up and choose one already."

In Fernest, titles were passed on through hereditary succession. The children of nobles would always be nobles, and the children of commoners would always be commoners. As with anything, however, there were exceptions. If a man from the ranks of the nobility took a common woman as his wife, she could become nobility. This came with all sorts of privileges, so it was common for powerful merchants and the like to marry off their daughters in this way.

The other exception was for those who were knighted after displaying extraordinary feats of valor in battle. Naturally, this latter exception was the one that applied to Olivia. In response to Claudia's explanation of all this, Olivia put her hands over her ears and pretended not to hear, then threw herself face down on the table so hard her head banged on the surface. Claudia rolled her eyes while Ashton patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Olivia, it'll be easier if you pick something soon. The ogr—Senior Colonel Otto can be scary," he said, shivering as though he'd remembered something. Olivia looked up and nodded reluctantly before swallowing down her soup in a single gulp.

"Right, I've got to get back to work," said Ashton. His eyes were dull like a dead fish as he headed off to Otto's office. After he'd gone, Olivia and Claudia went to Claudia's quarters.

"Wow, this is really, really tidy," said Olivia, looking around in fascination. "It's nothing like mine." The room was sparsely furnished, with only a simple bed, a writing desk, and a small bookshelf. *I think it's more that yours is just unbelievably messy in comparison*, thought Claudia, but she didn't say it.

"All I really use it for is sleeping, after all," she said as she took a heavy tome from the bookshelf. It contained names of all the noble lines that had, for one reason or another, already died out. She gestured for Olivia to sit down on the bed, then sat down beside her and opened the book.

"H-Hey! Major, what do you think you're doing?"

"Lunch made me sleepy." Olivia had gotten under the covers and was snuggling in. Claudia dragged her out again, then thrust the book out under her nose. As she was wont to point out, if Olivia didn't pick a name soon, Otto would bang his fist on tables again.

“Come on, choose.”

“You really are pushy, Claudia...” muttered Olivia, taking the book. She flipped through the pages without any interest. Before even a minute had passed, she started fidgeting, turning this way and that, before facing Claudia with boredom written plain in her expression.

“What if we played tag inste—?”

“No.”

“Okay, hide-and-se—?”

“Absolutely not.”

Olivia fell silent for a moment, then said seriously, “You’re quite selfish, you know.”

“Look who’s talking!” cried Claudia, her voice growing shrill. Just then, Olivia, who was half-heartedly turning the pages again, stopped short.

“This crest...” she said, gazing down. At last, she showed some interest.

“Huh? Which one?” Claudia looked, and saw a drawing of a skull covered in scarlet roses. On the skull’s forehead was a red gemstone in the shape of a diamond, with two great black scythes crossed behind it.

That’s an inauspicious crest if ever I saw one... thought Claudia. She checked, and saw that the line had ended over a hundred and fifty years earlier in Tempus Fugit 804. The key point of why it had ended, however, was not written.

“The House of Valedstorm... How odd. It’s usually written here how a line ended, but this time, there’s nothing,” said Claudia, tilting her head in puzzlement. Beside her, Olivia stared down at the crest with uncharacteristic seriousness. Her usual frivolity was nowhere to be found. Claudia sat for a while taking in this rare scene, until at last Olivia slowly raised her head.

“I’ve decided. This will be my name.”



“Wha—?! Ser, I know I told you to hurry, but you shouldn’t make this decision lightly. There’s lots of other names.” At the very least, Claudia thought, there was no need to take on a name with such an unsettling crest. She snatched the book from Olivia, and turned hurriedly to a different page.

“See, what about this one? The colors match your hair, Major,” she said, aware of how pushy she was being as she pointed to a silver moon surrounded by sarsasso flowers.

“No need. From today onward, my name is Olivia Valedstorm,” said Olivia without so much as another glance at the book.

“But...” Looking into Olivia’s eyes, Claudia felt the force of her resolve and knew there was no point arguing further. “I see, ser.”

“By the way, do you think I could find out what happened to this house?”

“What happened...?” Claudia ran a hand over the book, mulling over Olivia’s question. For a noble house from over a hundred and fifty years ago, it wouldn’t be easy. She looked up, and found Olivia gazing at her with a hungry look in her eyes.

“Weeell... I imagine you could probably find out at the Royal Library in the capital.”

“What’s the Royal Library?” said Olivia, curious.

“You don’t know about the library? It contains the whole history of the kingdom. And the Kingdom of Fernest is said to be the most ancient nation in all of Duvedirica, so it’s scarcely an exaggeration to say the whole of history. You can probably find just about anything there.”

“The whole of history...” murmured Olivia with a hard expression Claudia had never seen before. It made her delicate features appear even more otherworldly.

“Major?” she asked. Olivia was silent. “Major!”

“Oh! Sorry,” said Olivia, coming back to herself. For the first time, her smile appeared forced.

“Is something wrong, ser?” Claudia asked.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, Colonel Otto said to choose a name quickly, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Yes, I suppose...”

“Then you’d better go let him know I’ve chosen one!”

“Wha—? H-Hold on, stop pushing! I’m going, I’m going already!” Olivia shoved her with her unnatural strength, and Claudia, helpless to resist, was driven out of the room. She whirled around just in time to see Olivia slam the door shut and hear the key click. She’d been locked out.

Even though it’s my room, she thought. More importantly, though, what in the world has gotten into her? Dazed and confused by the rapid progression of events, she headed off to see Otto.

Olivia listened to Claudia’s fading footsteps, then picked up the book she’d tossed on the bed. As she did so, she also pulled out the large gemstone that hung around her neck. The scarlet gemstone that had been left along with the ebony blade on the day Z had vanished. She opened the book once more to the crest of the House of Valedstorm, and compared the two.

Just like I thought. The shape, the color... They’re totally identical. With her suspicion confirmed, Olivia’s eyes now fell on the two great black scythes behind the skull. Slowly she began to smile, then laughed out loud.

At last! she cried in a strange tongue unlike any human language. *I found a clue! Just you wait, Z. I’m coming!*

III

Olivia Valedstorm would come to be called the Ebony Hero by the generations that followed. The first mention of her in the annals of the history of Duvedirica came in Tempus Fugit 999. *Duvedirica’s Record of Heroes* told of the wartime exploits of young Olivia with her beautiful silver hair. This *Record of Heroes* was so beloved it even inspired a children’s picture book, but one key difference between the *Record* and others in the genre went largely unnoticed.

While most records began from the protagonist’s youth, *Duvedirica’s Record*

of Heroes began from Olivia's victories as a soldier in the royal army. In other words, there was no record whatsoever of anything before that. The picture book depicted her childhood, but the author admitted themselves that this was fictionalized to make the tale easier for children to follow. The greatest mystery was the story that this girl with no background had been raised by a God of Death. In the distant past, just as in the present day, such beings were the stuff of fiction, and most people would scoff at the suggestion that they really existed. Even if, for the sake of argument, one were to entertain the idea, that did not explain why a God of Death would have raised Olivia, a human child. No one had any explanation for this.

However, the unusual level of detail in the numerous anecdotes Olivia gave of her time with the God of Death proved a headache for a great number of scholars. Most concluded that "God of Death" was an alias for the person who had actually raised her. Some, however, suggested that perhaps there really was such a thing as a God of Death. Their evidence was a recently uncovered letter. Or, to be more accurate, something that *seemed* like a letter. It had been caught between the pages of a book that was believed to belong to Olivia until it was found entirely by accident by the archivist filing it. It appeared to be a letter from the God of Death, addressed to Olivia, and it was exceedingly strange.

The first point raised as evidence was the script in which the letter was written. The letters didn't resemble any known language from any era. Adding weight to this were the records of Olivia sometimes speaking in an unintelligible language. The discovery of the letter incited fierce debate between experts in the field over its veracity. Olivia Valedstorm remained cloaked in mysteries, and this is perhaps why so many continued to be drawn to her story.

Imperial Command at Windsome Castle

Rosenmarie, one of the Three Imperial Generals and commander of the Scarlet Knights, made Windsome Castle her base of operations. The stunning chalk-white castle shone where it stood on a small rise. As was clear from its total lack of battle scars, the castle had not fallen to a siege. Instead, the lord of the surrounding lands had surrendered it with a gracious, "May this be of use to

you, my lady.”

His welcome had also included presenting Rosenmarie with great works of art, ceremonial swords, and finally, in a particularly unsubtle gesture, a large sack stuffed with gold. The lords of the north of Fernest had learned early on of the Third and Fourth Legion’s defeat, and as such were rushing to be first in line to show their deference to the imperial army. Thanks to this, Rosenmarie now had half the northern lands under her control with little to no resistance. They all knew it was already over for Fernest, and were so desperate to curry what favor they could with their new imperial masters that they were as good as licking her boots.

Could anything be more jaw-droppingly pathetic?

A sigh slipped from Colonel Guyel Neurath, Rosenmarie’s aide, as he looked at the letter on the desk before him.

“Is this really what’s become of the fearsome Land of Lions? I can scarcely believe it. Especially that man, handing over his castle without a hint of resistance. I shouldn’t complain, but the way he sat by grinning like a fool as his lands were invaded... It made me sick to my stomach. Have they no shame?”

“Given how things played out, I think we know the answer to that. It’s like when a great tree that looks strong is actually all rotten beneath the ground,” said Rosenmarie with a snort of laughter.

“Of course, I’m grateful we saved time subduing them, but still...”

“Anyway, enough of that,” Rosemarie snapped, growing irritated. “Tell me about the Seventh Legion who killed General Osvannes. Shouldn’t we have something back from the Shimmer by now?” In response, Guyel shook his head silently. The Shimmer had sent its agents throughout the land to get information on the Seventh Legion’s movements, but they had not yet made any report.

Rosenmarie made a frustrated noise. “I didn’t think the Shimmer would be so usele... What’s wrong? You worried about something?” she broke off midsentence, peering at him. Guyel cursed silently.

Damn, it must have shown on my face... That won’t do, I need to work harder.

It was expected that, as an aide, he always kept a cool head. That was especially true when serving under an individual with such volatile emotions as Rosenmarie. Having said that, it would come across as unusual if he tried to evade the question, and he could easily see Rosenmarie becoming displeased with him.

With that in mind, he steeled himself and said, “My lady, have you heard the rumors of the monster girl kept by the Seventh Legion?” The words had no sooner left his mouth than there was a creak like a scream from Rosenmarie’s chair. Guyel inferred from this that the rumors had indeed reached Rosenmarie—the tales brought by the returned prisoners of a monster that wore the skin of a beautiful young girl.

No sword can touch her. No arrow can reach her. None who stand against her return alive.

Stories like this had cropped up before. It wasn’t unheard of for soldiers to see particularly fearsome enemies as more or other than human. Guyel knew that these delusional inventions were mere fairy tales. The difference this time was the sheer number who entertained this delusion. Thousands of soldiers were terrified of a single girl whom they called a “monster.” He heard that many of those who had faced this monster head-on had gone mad. Guyel couldn’t rightly dismiss the situation as a mere delusion. As a result of all this, he felt a touch of anxiety about the idea of battle with the Seventh Legion. Rosenmarie seemed to sense something of this, because she gave a derisive laugh.

“The monster girl? Hah! What about her? I’m going to avenge General Osvannes, and I couldn’t care less who I have to slice up to do it. I have this now, after all.” She stood up and, taking the sword that rested on the wall behind her, swept it up in the air. The steel blade slid from its sheath, shining red as though fresh from the forge. It felt as though the temperature in the room rose, but that had to be his imagination.

“A truly marvelous sword, my lady. Is this one of the Goddess’s works? So-called ‘magic’?”

“How should I know? I just got it from Felix. All I heard was that anyone I cut

with this will suffer the tortures of hell. Even monsters,” Rosenmarie said, smiling as she held up the sword. Right now, she didn’t care about toppling Fernest—she wanted to crush the Seventh Legion who had slain General Osvannes. Guyel could sympathize with her feelings, but Rosenmarie was one of the three great generals of the empire. She had a duty to lead not just her soldiers, but the citizens of the empire. Guyel decided he had to rein her in.

“While revenge for Lord Osvannes is important, General, you are also the supreme commander of the Scarlet Knights, not to mention one of the Three Generals. I beg you not to forget the great responsibility that comes with that,” he cautioned her.

“I don’t need you telling me that. You know I hate politics, but I’m still here dealing with this, aren’t I?” said Rosenmarie, tapping the pile of papers on the desk and looking away in irritation. Because of her position, Rosenmarie was technically obligated to administer the conquered northern lands. The lords had all surrendered of their own free will and so had been left in their roles acting on the empire’s behalf, the idea being that any discontent felt by the populace towards their conquerors would be directed at the lords who had rolled out the red carpet for them.

They were even using the lords to implement policies that would disadvantage their people. When their discontent reached its peak, governance would be officially transferred to the imperial bureaucracy. Rosenmarie planned that at this stage the lords would die at the hands of their own people. Praise for Rosenmarie tended to focus on her military achievements, so few knew of her genuine gift for scheming. Her plan this time was the height of cunning.

It will take time to assert our rule over the whole of the north. First, we need to solidify our hold on the northern reaches we currently control... thought Guyel. The war with Fernest was far from over. They had to prepare, so that when the Seventh Legion arrived, they could crush them into dust. After all, amongst the enemy ranks was the girl they called a monster.

Chapter Two: The Independent Cavalry Regiment Moves Out

I

How about now, Z? she asked.

No. You will miss if you shoot now.

How come? It's not moving any more. I should be able to hit it.

The girl held her bow taut, ready to shoot. Her eyes were fixed on a small animal with pure gray fur—a gray fox, often found all throughout Duvedirica. This one twitched its black ears, restless.

The gray fox is a timid creature. It uses those ears to listen for noises over a wide area to alert it to any potential threats. Like sonar, in a way.

What's sonar?

A machine that uses acoustic waves to detect objects' precise locations.

I don't know what that means.

Z was using difficult words again, and the girl frowned, bemused. Z sighed.

It matters not. The long and short of it is that, given your current level of skill, the fox will run away before your arrow reaches it.

What should I do, then?

What do I always tell you? First, closely observe your opponent.

The girl lowered her bow and, following Z's instructions, stared intently over at the gray fox. Some time passed, and then the fox's ears, which had up to now twitched in independent directions from each other, both turned to point in the same direction.

Z, the girl breathed.

It appears it has found what it was searching for. Now, where is it looking? Z prompted her. It drew closer to her and pointed. The girl felt a little embarrassed, but followed the direction of its finger.

Oh! A spotted rabbit. True to its name, the spotted rabbit had dappled fur in dark and light splotches. This one, however, had changed to match the color of the undergrowth so as to blend in with its surroundings. Thanks to its special ability to camouflage itself, the species was also known as the mimic rabbit.

Remember this well. No matter how cautious your target may be, that will change when it is stalking its prey. It is a living creature, after all, so it must eat in order to survive. It has dropped its guard in order to focus on its prey. Therefore, now is the time to strike.

Right!

The girl nocked another arrow and pulled her bowstring tight. She aimed at the gray fox, but Z's dark arm nudged her bow towards the spotted rabbit.

Wait for the moment the fox pounces. Even you should be able to hit it then.

Right! The fox sat perfectly still for a time, then gradually shuffled backwards before, in an instant, it leapt upon the rabbit in a single bound. At almost the same moment, the girl loosed her arrow. As the fox's jaws closed upon the rabbit, the arrow buried itself in its neck.

The girl and Z sat by a campfire under the light of a starry sky. The girl's ebony eyes sparkled as she impaled their dinner for the night on skewers around the fire.

In a single day, you have gotten very comfortable with a bow, murmured Z, looking at her heap of bounty.

Yeah, I have. I still like the sword better, though, she replied. Her eyes went to the white blade that rested against a tree trunk nearby.

That may be so. But you will not always be able to engage your enemies at close range. Mastering a weapon like the bow has its conveniences, said Z. It clicked its fingers, and a maelstrom of black mist appeared out of nowhere. The girl watched with rapt attention as Z unceremoniously tossed the bow into its

depths. It was swallowed up in an instant, before the maelstrom disappeared as though it had never been there at all.

Was that magic? Can I learn to do that? the girl asked, her eyes full of longing. The idea that you could put anything inside, like the Mysterious Box of Mysteries in her picture book, seemed wonderful to her. But Z's reply put an end to that fantasy.

That was not magic, it said. *It is, therefore, impossible for you.* The girl's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Oh... That's too bad. But look, Z! she said, immediately switching to a new topic. *I think this is ready. Let's eat—these vampire birds are so tender and tasty.* She picked up a charred bird and bit into it, smiling as the juices from the meat filled her mouth. Z threw the small branch in its hand into the fire, shaking its head.

Huh? Aren't you going to eat? What's wrong?

Food is wasted on me. I do not taste it, and it does not fill me up. My way of sustaining myself is fundamentally different from that of humans.

Huh. Okay... said the girl. She stopped munching on the bird, and asked instead, *So what do you normally eat?* Thinking hard, she realized she'd never seen Z eating anything. Z gazed at the girl for a time before it answered.

The souls...of humans, it said slowly.

Wow. Do those taste good? the girl asked. If they did, she thought, she'd like to try one.

It...depends on the quality. Humans of recent years have extremely low Odh. As a result, it has become rare to find any high-quality souls, Z replied. The girl got the sense that its mood had grown dark. As a being of darkness and shadow, however, Z gave no visible sign of this.

You mean they don't taste good? she asked. Z nodded.

I suppose that's right, if I were to put it in human terms. Besides that, rapid advances in civilization have extended human life spans considerably. Humans these days do not die easily, unless war breaks out. In today's world, I have to

content myself with scraps.

Why don't you kill humans and eat their souls? asked the girl. It seemed to her if only Z killed some humans right away rather than waiting for them to die, that would be much faster.

I do not kill, Z replied shortly. It threw another branch onto the fire, then continued. *Or rather, more accurately, with the exception of some few cases, we cannot kill. As I taught you once before, we may only interfere with humans who have just died, or infants who have not yet reached full sentience. However, while I can kill and devour infants, their souls are so small that it is hardly worth it.*

The girl considered Z's words, then asked, *You mean they don't fill you up?*

Simply put, yes, said Z. After this, Z taught the girl a great many things about souls. She was most surprised to learn that the human soul lived on, though only for a few moments, even after the body had ceased to function. The whole course of that person's life was contained in that soul, and that gave each one its character. The girl, who had always thought of human bodies—which unlike those of animals, she couldn't eat—as no more than garbage, reflected on how important it was to learn new things. Z also told her that souls who escaped being devoured went to a place called the Zero Boundary. They drifted there until the day they were given a new life.

Thank you for teaching me all that, the girl said. *It sounds like eating souls is really hard work. What if I went and killed some humans for you? There're lots and lots of humans outside the forest, right? How many do you need to feel full? Ten? Or maybe more like twenty?* she asked. Z stared at her, processing this barrage of questions.

Truly, you are worthy of observation. You don't want to return to the human world? Not even a little?

I've never wanted to. Why would I? Though, I would like to try the bread and cake that show up in my books... the girl said, tilting her head. She looked utterly bewildered by the question. Z threw its last branch onto the fire. The flames crackled and a few sparks, beautiful and ephemeral, flew up into the night.

Is that so... said Z. But it seems I have made you worry. It is unnecessary, I assure you. I eat well enough. The girl made a thoughtful noise, then smiled, her worries alleviated.

That's good, then, she said, and began to stuff her face with bird meat again.

Z watched her for a moment. *When you are done with that,* it said, *I will teach you about some other foods. You will be hitting a growth spurt soon.*

What's a growth spurt?

Simply put, your bones will lengthen, and your body will grow larger. A limited diet will adversely impact that growth. You need to eat plenty of vegetables, not just meat.

The girl giggled. *Okay,* she said. *You really know everything, huh, Z?* Her smile was full of trust and admiration. Z gazed up at the hundreds of millions of stars above them. That smile had reminded it of another girl from long ago.

That's what happens when you live an eternity without purpose... it murmured.

"Morning already..." Olivia mumbled, turning her head to look out the open window. Sunlight streamed in, accompanied by a breeze that carried the scent of new leaves as it brushed her cheeks.

I think I overslept... It's been ages since I dreamt about my childhood, though. I wonder what Z's doing now, and where it is... Oh, I hope I can see Z soon. These thoughts preoccupied Olivia as she reached for the silver pocket watch that rested by her pillow. She pushed the lever to open it, and saw that the hour hand was already pointing to nine o'clock. Breakfast was long over. There wasn't even any point using *Swift Step* to rush to the mess hall.

Oh no... she thought, but quickly cheered up. *Not to worry. I'll get Ashton to make egg and mustard sandwiches later. Maybe ten or so.* Olivia jumped out of bed, then went over to the wall and raised one leg up perfectly vertically. She leaned in towards the wall, loosening her muscles. Just then, a knock came at the door, along with Claudia's voice.

"Are you still not up, Major?" Claudia called, sounding exasperated. Olivia,

immediately remembering that today was the day they left for the Emaleid Citadel, grabbed her uniform from where it hung on the wall, threw it on, and dashed over to open the door.

Two hours later, they were out on the parade grounds. A steady stream of soldiers filed in, awaiting their imminent departure for Emaleid. Claudia ordered them into four columns, sweat beading on her forehead.

Meanwhile, beside her, Olivia sang, “The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah,” amusing herself with some ants on the ground. Claudia became even more unsettled when she muttered, “It’s been ages since I ate an ant...” with a hungry look in her eyes.

Thinking she wouldn’t put it past Olivia to actually start eating ants, Claudia said hurriedly, “Major, would you please stop playing with the ants now? The soldiers are all assembled. It’s time.”

“Right, okay,” said Olivia. Claudia motioned her towards a raised platform. Olivia clapped her grimy hands together then trotted over to mount it. She looked out over the ranks of soldiers. The members of the former detached force, along with a number of new conscripts, made up the three thousand soldiers who would form the new Independent Cavalry Regiment. The point of difference from standard cavalry regiments was that their commander—Olivia, that is—had been granted discretionary powers. This was entirely thanks to Paul, who doted on Olivia less like a parent than as a grandfather.

The soldiers who had been in the detached force gazed solemnly up at Olivia, waiting for her to speak. The new recruits, on the other hand, generally thought one of two things as they laid eyes on their commander for the first time.

“Have you ever seen a girl that gorgeous? Is she even human?” said one, totally enraptured.

“This little girl’s the regiment commander? They *do* know our lives are on the line here, right?” said another, full of skepticism.

Of course it’ll take time for some of them to accept her, thought Claudia. *A girl that young in the military, and a regiment commander at that—it’s unheard of. Ah, well. They’ll get over it once they’ve seen her in battle.* She pictured Olivia

running unfettered across the battlefield, beautiful and majestic.

“Regiment Commander Olivia will speak now! Stand to attention!” she bellowed. All eyes pointed towards Olivia up on the platform. Olivia coughed once to clear her throat, then stood in a wide, imposing stance, putting her hands on her hips to drive the point home.

“In war, humans die easily. Dying means no more tasty food—and that includes cake. So Claudia, Tactician Ashton, and I are going to come up with a good strategy to make sure we’re all harder to kill. So, for the sake of tasty food and cake tomorrow, do your best to stay alive, everyone,” Olivia finished. She then turned on her heels and jogged back down the steps from the platform. Ashton stood off to one side, burying his face in his hands. Almost all the new recruits stared open-mouthed in total confusion.

At this point, Gile cried out in an absurdly loud voice, “Oh, how Commander Olivia’s words pierced my heart! That’s our Silver-Haired Valkyrie!” He went on, crying out some unintelligible nonsense like “I could weep!” and such that no one really followed. Claudia hurried over to the platform and ran up the steps.

“Y-You heard her! Regiment Commander Olivia is working on a plan to keep you alive, so you can ride into battle without fear! Independent Cavalry Regiment, move out!” she bellowed. The soldiers of the former detached force began to mount their horses. This seemed to pull the new recruits back to reality and they jumped into action. Olivia stroked the neck of her favorite black horse, then leapt up onto its back. The black horse swished its tail with a happy neigh.

“Major, all preparations are complete. We await your orders,” said Claudia, riding up beside Olivia. Olivia punched a fist straight up into the sky.

“Righto! To the Emaleid Citadel!” she cried. At this, trumpets blared to signal the soldiers to move out, and Olivia’s Independent Cavalry Regiment began their journey to the Emaleid Citadel.

II

The Independent Cavalry Regiment made their first stop after leaving Galia

Fortress in the town of Canalia. In the distance, the Est Mountains stood against the clear blue sky while down on the plains flowers were beginning to bloom in vivid colors. A pleasant breeze gently shook the grass and carried a sweet aroma to Claudia. In another couple of weeks, this whole area would be covered in flowers.

“Major, look there on the right. With this warm weather we’ve been having, the flowers are starting to bloom,” said Claudia. Olivia was silent. “Are you listening to me, Major?” she tried again, but Olivia still didn’t respond. She didn’t even glance at the flowers, and her mouth was set in a hard line as she stroked the black horse’s mane. Claudia sighed. “Major, don’t you think this bad mood of yours has gone on long enough? It’s going to impact the soldiers’ morale.”

“In that case,” Olivia finally replied, “can we go to Emaleid via the capital?”

“I told you before, ser. That’s not possible,” said Claudia. Olivia puffed up her cheeks in a pout and looked away. Even the black horse moved away from Claudia’s own horse, as though it was channeling Olivia’s bad temper.

“Olivia, when we take our next break, how about I make you a mustard and jerky sandwich? That sounds nice, doesn’t it? So cheer up a bit, come on,” said Ashton from where he rode beside them. His attempt to snap her out of her moodiness involved some top-quality bait. Olivia moved slightly in her saddle, but continued to face away from them. On this particular occasion, Ashton’s special mustard wasn’t going to cut it.

“Tomorrow night we’re staying in the capital, right?” Olivia had been over the moon when she found the capital was on the way to the Emaleid Citadel. When this possibility had been flatly ruled out, however, her mood had immediately soured, and she made no effort to conceal it.

There were two main routes to reach the Emaleid Citadel from Galia Fortress: crossing the Est Mountains before passing through the capital and continuing westward, or proceeding north through Canalia, then following the edge of the desert east. The Independent Cavalry Regiment was taking the latter route. The reason for this was simple—Osmund and his cavalry regiment had chosen the

route through the capital. Unlike Osmund's regiment, which had prioritized haste, the Independent Cavalry Regiment had to prioritize acquiring information and sniffing out the enemy. In order to get a picture of the enemy's movements over a wider area, they needed to take a different route. While Olivia had been granted far-reaching discretionary powers, this was still the army. She couldn't go altering their route for personal reasons.

We've just left, and we're already plagued with problems, thought Claudia with a private sigh.

"Major," she began, in another attempt to bring Olivia around, "even if we did stop off in the capital, you wouldn't have time to do proper research. Besides, you can't just waltz into the Royal Library any time you like."

Olivia was silent for a moment. "Why not?" she asked. Her eyebrows knitted together in a frown. Claudia held up two fingers as she replied.

"First, it takes two days to apply for permission to enter. After that, you need a reference from a trustworthy individual. In this case, trustworthy means nobility—and then only if the family has a certain degree of status. Every single book and document housed in the library is highly valuable, after all."

"I'd love to go too, but they don't let commoners in," added Ashton under his breath, sounding envious. Ashton was a voracious reader as well, even if he wasn't on Olivia's level. The library undoubtedly held a special place in the heart of any booklover.

Olivia gave no sign she'd heard Ashton. "But I'm a noble now, right? Even then they still wouldn't let me in?" she protested, pouting.

"I'm afraid not, ser. Nobility is something like a certificate of permission that gets you through the gate. In order to enter the library proper, however, a trustworthy reference is absolutely nonnegotiable."

Claudia didn't even know where Olivia was from. When she'd asked about her home, Olivia had said it was a temple in the middle of a deep forest. This was too vague to be helpful, so she showed Claudia on a map, pointing to a spot in the far west of Duvedirica. Those lands were generally thought of as a vast region of unexplored forest, inhabited only by a few small settlements. From Olivia's distinctive silver hair and ebony eyes, it was clear that she wasn't from

those settlements. Olivia said that she'd been taken in by this Z person as a baby. She recounted the fairly incredible tale of her past with a wide smile, leaving Claudia at a loss for how to reply.

Olivia's past wasn't the only reason, but all the same, Claudia felt sure that just claiming nobility wouldn't be enough for her to get easy entry into the library. At the end of the day, the important thing was that intangible evidence—trust. It wasn't something you could earn in a single day. Olivia could earn as many medals as she liked, and it wouldn't change the fact that she currently wasn't trustworthy in the slightest. Not that Claudia would ever have said so out loud.

There was in fact one exception to the rules. Ashton, it seemed, was unaware of it, but anyone, even a commoner, could enter the library if they paid an enormous sum of money. For better or for worse, money had the power to narrow the divisions of class, even if only slightly. Claudia thought it unlikely that any but the richest of the richest merchants could afford it, however.

"I couldn't get in even with you as my reference, Claudia?" said Olivia, looking hopeful.

"Hmmm. It's hard to say," said Claudia. "The Jung family does go back a fairly long way. A reference from me might work, but I couldn't guarantee anything." The Jung family could trace their line back to the days of King Julius zu Fernest. Over the past six hundred years or so, the family had made a name for themselves in battle, turning out an impressive number of knights. These days, however, they were little more than another noble house with remote holdings and lacking the means to even maintain a second residence in the capital. This was largely the reason Claudia wouldn't make any guarantees.

"Okay. Who could guarantee it, then?" Olivia asked, leaning towards Claudia, unsmiling. Claudia sensed she might be in danger here, but tried to think. One person immediately came to mind—Paul. He was more than sufficiently accomplished and respected, and from a good noble family. Paul would also likely be only too happy to provide a reference if Olivia asked for it. The problem was that he was also a general, and the supreme commander of the Seventh Legion. It wouldn't be appropriate to go to him casually with a personal request, and so Claudia decided it was better not to suggest that to Olivia.

If not Paul, then someone else who's approachable, and could give a reference certain to be accepted... Does such a person even exist? Claudia wondered. In the back of her mind, she saw a man with pale blond hair just like her own. When she was little, she'd once chased after him, brandishing a wooden sword with all her might.

"Neinhardt—uh, Brigadier General Neinhardt would probably be a safe choice. He has a lot of contacts, so he might even be able to get the two-day application process reduced."

"Who's Brigadier General Neinhardt?" asked Olivia, her head tilted in puzzlement. Claudia grimaced. Olivia had definitely met Neinhardt several times, but apparently had no recollection of this. Ashton said her memory was superb, but it seemed that this didn't apply to things she wasn't interested in.

"You don't remember, ser? I believe you met him so that he could thank you after you slew the Raging Bull Samuel."

"Raging Bull? Samuel?" Olivia crossed her arms and grumbled to herself, the confusion on her face only deepening. Claudia described Neinhardt in more detail, and at last Olivia's eyes widened in recognition.

"Oh, I remember! The human who did a bad impression of a fish!"

Claudia snorted. She couldn't help it; Olivia's words had been so totally unexpected. No one but Olivia could have described Neinhardt in such a way. Even as his cousin, Claudia recognized how dashing handsome he was. Olivia's description would probably make any lady with fond feelings for him fall over in a faint. If there had been such a lady, that is.

Oh, I have got to tell Neinhardt about this, Claudia thought with evil glee.

Beside her, Olivia said quietly, "That's right, I got those delicious fruits. He said they were called cloudy peaches."

I'm sure he really wanted to avenge Florentz himself... But even so, Neinhardt still feels indebted to Olivia, thought Claudia. She knew better than anyone just how fiercely loyal Neinhardt was. He would probably—no, definitely—readily consent to being Olivia's reference. Memories of Florentz and his sweet smile welled inside her, but Claudia turned back to Olivia to try to bring her back to

the task at hand.

“If you plan to ask Neinhardt for his reference, Major,” she said seriously, “first, you must give your full attention to carrying out your duties. If you do not, I doubt he will even hear your request.”

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Olivia. She clenched her fist and nodded a few times, then cried, “Let’s do this thing!” Her bad mood had vanished.

That grumpy expression really didn’t suit her, thought Claudia. The influence of her improved temper spread amongst the soldiers. They, too, all looked relieved.

Now we can finally focus on the actual mission, thought Claudia. As she breathed a sigh of relief, Ashton came up to thank her. This made her feel ever so slightly pleased.

Two days later, at around midday, the Independent Cavalry Regiment arrived at Canalia.

III

“This... This is so much worse than I imagined.”

The words slipped from Claudia unbidden as she took in the awful scene that met them at Canalia. The wooden barricades that surrounded the town had almost all collapsed. A number of burly men carried logs to and fro as they made repairs in solemn silence, but their progress was slow. Anger towards those who had done this burned inside Claudia as she crossed the bridge and passed through the splintered gates to where an even more gruesome sight awaited them. Smashed windows. Fallen bricks. Almost every building was in ruins, and everywhere they looked was stained with lurid splatters of blood. It wasn’t hard to imagine what had happened. The town might have been reclaimed by Fernest, but now it was shrouded in sorrow.

“Ugh, that smell...” Claudia said, her face twisting. The wind carried with it the stench of decay, like corpses had been left out to rot somewhere nearby. She’d grown used to that stench on the battlefield, but she didn’t like it. Ashton frowned, covering his nose with a handkerchief. Olivia, meanwhile, appeared

unfazed. She gazed around with interest at the ruined town. Claudia wondered if the townspeople were accustomed to the smell. They didn't react to it at all; they only stood watching the Independent Cavalry Regiment with empty eyes, keeping their distance.

"The restoration efforts are making even less progress than reports indicated," Ashton muttered darkly. His voice was hard.

"It seems that way," Claudia replied. Built along a bend in the river, Canalia was known throughout the south for its stunning scenery. There was no trace of that now. Claudia tried but couldn't begin to imagine how long it would take to return the town to what it had been.

Ashton and the others arrived at the military outpost in the center of the town. They dismounted to greet the captain of the platoon stationed there. As they did so, several children who'd been watching them ran up and gathered around Olivia. A girl and boy of six or seven years old, and another boy who was perhaps ten. They all looked up at Olivia in amazement. Apparently even children couldn't help but be drawn to her extraordinary beauty.

"You're so pretty, miss! You look like my doll," said the girl. She proudly held up the tattered doll to show Olivia.

"Really?" said Olivia, patting her cheeks as though to check the shape of her own face. "I've never paid that much attention to how I look." Beside her, the smaller boy's nose twitched as he breathed in her scent.

"Does something smell?" she asked.

"Yeah. Something smells really good," he said.

"Aha, I bet it's this," said Olivia with a grin. With an air of showing off, she pulled a cookie out of her bag. At once, the children's eyes lit up, sparkling like a starry sky.

"Wow, miss! That's a cookie, right?"

"That's right." Olivia paused. "Have you never had a cookie?" The boy's eyes widened in surprise at the question, and he shook his head vigorously.

"No way. Only rich nobles eat stuff like that. My ma said so."

Olivia looked at Ashton, mystified. “Is that true?” she asked.

“I mean, in the capital they aren’t as rare as that, but they’re still what you’d call a luxury good. Not the sort of thing commoners can eat on a whim.”

“But you’re a commoner, right? And you said you’ve eaten cake before. On the way to Fort Lamburke, you definitely said ‘Yes, obviously I know what cake is. I’ve eaten it,’” Olivia said, in a small display of her incredible memory.

“I come from a decently successful merchant family,” Ashton explained.

“What does that mean?”

“We’re relatively wealthy and...well, simply put, my family has money.” This was yet another example of Olivia’s terrifying ignorance of everyday life. Raised in the middle of a forest or not, when Ashton first learned that she hadn’t known what money was until she enlisted in the royal army it had made his head spin.

“Huh, and that’s why you’ve eaten cake even though you’re a commoner...” mused Olivia, gazing at the cookie in her hand. Then, she turned back to the children.

“Want to try one?” she asked. The children blinked at her. Their hands reached out, then pulled back. Clearly, they were unsure whether they were allowed to say yes.

“R...Really, miss? We haven’t any money, you know,” said the older boy, pulling his pockets inside out to show her. A few scraps scattered to the ground.

“Oh no, I don’t need money. And even though it said in my book that they’re tooth-rottingly delicious, they don’t really rot your teeth, so you don’t have to worry,” said Olivia, then handed a cookie to each of the children. The three of them looked at one another, then crammed the cookies into their mouths with smiles of joy.

“This is the best thing ever, miss!”

“The best!”

“It’s so good?! How’s it so good?!” The children cried out one after another in delight. Ashton glanced at Olivia, and saw her with her arms folded and a proud

expression.

“Hey,” he said, exasperated, “What are you doing carrying cookies around? And do you have any left in there?”

“Ummm...” Olivia peered into her bag. “About ten, I think?” Ashton turned to the line of red-roofed buildings in the west of the town, where another group of children stood watching them, unsure whether to approach.

“One, two, three... Would you look at that, the perfect number,” he said. “Well? Aren’t you going to give them their cookies too?”

“Wha—?!” Olivia made a shocked noise. “But...my cookies... What about...” Ashton had never seen her look so despairing. She then threw a succession of childish insults at him—“ogre,” “meanie,” the list went on.

“Call me all the names you like. Surely you agree it’s unfair to give these children cookies and not the others?”

“But then...then isn’t it unfair to take all my cookies too?” Olivia said desperately, puffing out her cheeks with a great huff. Ashton patted her twice on the shoulder.

“You’ll get more cake later. And no ordinary cake either!” said Ashton with a conspiratorial chuckle.

“Wait, what?” Olivia swallowed hungrily, her anger all forgotten.

“As it happens, I’m acquainted with a cake maker in the capital. I hear one bite of their cake, and you’ll never be satisfied with anything else.”

““One bite of their cakes and you’ll never be satisfied with anything else...”” echoed Olivia, entranced. Ashton pressed his advantage.

“That’s right. You know what that means? Cake that’s more delicious than anything you’ve had before.”



Although that was just what the rumors said.

“S-Seriously? You... You mean you’ll take me to this cake shop?!”

“I swear it on the Senefelder name,” replied Ashton. He put his hand to his chest and gave a gentlemanly bow.

“Then it’s a promise!” Olivia cried, bearing down on him with fervor in her eyes. She had taken the bait hook, line and sinker. Ashton took this as consent and, snickering internally, beckoned the other children. They approached timidly.

“Right. This nice lady is going to give you all a tasty treat,” Ashton announced. “You don’t have to pay anything, of course. Got it? Okay, now line up in front of her and—” Before Ashton could finish his sentence, the children had formed a line with the efficiency of well-drilled soldiers. He smiled to himself, then looked pointedly at Olivia. She forced a smile onto her face, and began handing her cookies out to the children one by one. Ashton decided to write off the tremor in her hands as she parted with the final cookie as a trick of the light.

“That was very sweet,” said a dignified voice from behind him. He turned and saw Claudia standing there. Her smile was as soft as a ray of sunlight in spring. Ashton, suddenly feeling a little bashful, scratched his nose and tried to brush her off.

“I mean, it’s something, at least. After that, all we can do is pray for the recovery to go quickly.”

“Indeed,” said Claudia, after a pause. The two of them looked over at Olivia, where she stood surrounded by children and laughing innocently.

The next morning during breakfast, the platoon captain came to see Olivia and her companions in their makeshift lodging. They looked unhappy.

“Has something happened?” asked Claudia. “We’re supposed to leave after breakfast.” The captain scratched their head.

“Very sorry to bother you during breakfast, sers. The thing is—”

“Please!” From behind the captain, a man cried out, then threw himself at

Olivia's feet. "I beg you, please save Lieutenant General Sara!" He was covered in grime, but on his epaulets were six purple stars. A messenger from the Sixth Legion, then.

"What are you doing here? Isn't the Sixth Legion defending Fort Peshitta?" Ashton asked him. The man, who introduced himself as Berhard, nodded fervently in response.

Ashton recalled that the Sixth Legion had been defeated by the Steel Chargers on the southern front, but had narrowly avoided total annihilation. They were now, he was sure, assigned to defense at Fort Peshitta in the west of the central lands.

"Berhard, was it? First, let go of the major. Then we'll hear what you have to say." Claudia had leapt up from her chair and now glowered down at the man.

"F-F-Forgive me!" he spluttered, backing away from Olivia and pressing his face flat to the ground. Claudia exhaled loudly through her nose, then sat back down. Olivia herself seemed unbothered.

"What's up, then?" she asked casually. "You said something about saving Lieutenant General Sara?"

"Y-Yes, ser! The Sixth Legion is currently under siege by the Swaran army! I have come to beg for your aid!"

IV

Fort Peshitta

"This is it then, I suppose," said Sara, peering down from the fortress walls at the clamoring Swaran soldiers below. Senior Colonel Roland seized her arm tightly, his breathing ragged.

"Your Highness, you mustn't watch the battle from up here! What if an arrow were to hit you?"

"At worst, I suppose I'd die," replied Sara. She sounded unconcerned as Roland dragged her away. Lieutenant General Sara son Rivier was twenty-one years old, possessed a delicate beauty like a sculpture of blown glass, and was

the only woman to hold a general's rank in the Royal Army.

This was not the only face she wore, however.

Sara was also the fourth princess of Fernest. The only reason she was here was a shameless attempt to garner sympathy from the peasants by putting a member of the royal family on the front lines. That was the truth behind how Sara, who had always lagged a little behind the other generals, had ended up in command of the Sixth Legion. For the royal family, she was a convenient choice. As fourth princess, she had little political importance, and unlike most princesses, she'd learned how to use a sword as a child after being inspired by the knights in her picture books.

"Then you understand why you must come away from here, Your Highness!" said Roland. "If you die, the Sixth Legion will be lost!"

Here, Sara's personal guard came running up to them, looking flustered. With an emphatic sigh, Roland dressed them down before ordering them to the princess's side. As they spoke, the Swaran soldiers raised ladders to the fortress walls and came clambering up with murder in their eyes. Their allies held the assailants off with spears, as well as dropping rocks and even boiling water onto them. A week had passed since the Kingdom of Swaran, now a vassal state to the empire, had sent this mighty host to assault Fort Peshitta. Upon seeing that their enemy massively outnumbered them, Sara had decided to hole up within the fort and wait out the siege. For this to work, however, they needed food, and their supplies were dwindling. Even the strongest armies in history had never won a battle while starving, and the Sixth Legion wasn't all that strong to begin with.

"Do you think reinforcements will come, in the end?" Sara asked absently, like it was someone else's problem. She sat on the chair where Roland had put her, hugging her knees to her chest. The question hadn't been directed at Roland, but he answered dutifully anyway.

"A messenger left with the utmost haste for the Seventh Legion, but..." He trailed off, pursing his lips. The meaning was plain. A messenger had indeed been sent, but they knew the Seventh Legion was moving to meet the imperial army in the north following the defeat of the Third and Fourth Legions. Calling

on them for aid in spite of that had been little more than a gamble. Besides, even if the Seventh Legion came galloping to their rescue, would it matter?

“It’ll take another week at the very least for any reinforcements to arrive. We won’t hold out till then, will we?” said Sara. She exhaled deeply, then smiled at Roland. He said nothing, his lips still pursed as usual. But a shadow fell over his face that told Sara she was right.

Fort Peshitta had been a rushed construction job at the end of the warlord era, and the finished fort wasn’t exactly robust. Even now, the enemy hammered on the gates with their battering ram, and with every strike the wooden bar holding them shut creaked painfully. The soldiers of the Sixth Legion were doing everything they could to defend the walls, but the enemy were taking full advantage of their numbers. For every attacker they cut down, another immediately appeared behind the corpse of their comrade. In the battle with the Steel Chargers, they had managed to escape by the skin of their teeth. This time, however, they were trapped inside the fortress walls.

If it comes to that, I’ll surrender, thought Sara. If I offer myself up, they should spare the soldiers. I might be illegitimate, but I’m still a princess. As the roar of battle echoed through Fort Peshitta, Sara quietly steeled her resolve.

After they finished resting and resupplying, the Independent Cavalry Regiment left Canalia. Gaggles of children came to wave them off. Olivia smiled and waved back as they rode out. A moment after they exited the town, however, she pulled on the black horse’s reins to bring it to a stop, and looked towards the forest. Her smile was gone, replaced with a frown.

“Major? Is something wrong?” Claudia asked, glancing around them to look for threats.

But Olivia only replied, “I think I saw a rat scurrying around over there.”

“I... I see. A rat.” Claudia relaxed. A rat seemed a rather trivial thing to stop so abruptly for, she thought. She followed Olivia’s gaze, but couldn’t see any sign of this rat. It would be pretty unusual in the first place for a rat to be out in the open in such brilliant sunshine. She tentatively called up the power in her eyes—the ability Olivia had named *Heaven’s Sight*—and looked again, but she still

couldn't make out any trace of a rat.

"I don't see anything, ser," she said bluntly. Olivia, apparently losing interest, looked away from the forest, then reached out to stroke the black horse's neck.

"You don't need to worry. If one comes near us, I'll just stomp on it. Anyway, are we going to help the Sixth Legion or what?" said Olivia, turning the black horse west. They were supposed to be going to the desert town of Cefim, which lay in the opposite direction.

"Are you really sure about that, ser? It would mean departing from our orders..."

"But now that we know what's happening, we can't just leave them to die. And there's no time to send a messenger back to the Seventh Legion," replied Olivia. As she spoke, she looked back at Bernhard. He bowed so deeply his face collided with his horse's back.

"That's all true of course, ser. I just worry that if we detour, the threat to the Second Legion will only grow," said Claudia. If the question was which was in greater peril, the answer was obviously the Sixth Legion. But looking at the war as a whole, it was also clear which side the scales favored. Claudia knew it was the height of arrogance to want to save both, but that was how she truly felt.

"I told you, the Second Legion will be fine. Remember what Ashton said? The northern imperial army is waiting for the Seventh Legion to show up, which means they won't make a move until we do," said Olivia. She looked at Ashton, who screwed up his face.

"I mean, I wouldn't... I did say that, but it was just a thought I had. I don't know if I was right or not..." he said weakly, looking between Olivia and Claudia and shrinking down in his saddle. Olivia patted him hard on the back with a hearty laugh.

"Oh, Ashton, you're so funny."

"What about me?!"

"That thing you do where you get the right answer and then go overthinking it. That's why you can't beat me in chess. Thinking things through is important too, but—" Here Olivia's face suddenly became serious. "—if you think too

much, you can lose yourself.” Ashton opened his mouth to protest, then hung his head. Olivia laced her fingers together and stretched her arms out, then looked back to Claudia. “Right, we don’t have much time, so we’d better get a move on.” The black horse, as though it understood its master’s wishes, gave a high-pitched neigh and charged forward across the plain. Ashton, Claudia, and the whole of the Independent Cavalry Regiment scrambled to follow her.

Just hold on, Lieutenant General Sara... thought Berhard. He gripped his reins and spurred his horse into a gallop.

“Did that girl notice us?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Two men clad entirely in black stepped out of the forest just as the Independent Cavalry Regiment vanished from sight. They belonged to the Shimmer—the imperial intelligence agency. Their names were First Lieutenant Arvin and Sergeant Major Lester.

“The way she reacted, she definitely noticed us. And at this distance! Going off her appearance, do you think she’s the monster everyone’s been talking about?”

“Lieutenant Arvin, you must be mistaken. She wasn’t even using a spyglass. It was a coincidence, nothing more,” said Lester with a shrug. He returned his spyglass to its holder at his hip.

“This is why you’re never getting promoted. You’re blinded by your assumptions. There are things in this world beyond our understanding, and that’s a fact.”

“You mean...mages?” said Lester, looking doubtful. Arvin nodded.

“Mages are one example. And if mages exist, we shouldn’t be surprised if there are other beings like them.”

“And you think that pretty little girl is one? Honestly, she looked to me like she couldn’t hurt a fly,” said Lester, looking in the direction the Independent Cavalry Regiment had rode off in with a faint scowl.

“The Royal Army aren’t such fools that they’d let a pretty little girl command a force like that. This is a prime example of why you can’t judge by appearances.

You heard about Fort Caspar, didn't you?"

"Neither arrow nor blade can touch her or something? Honestly, I thought that was probably some local fairytale."

"Well, that fairytale had four thousand soldiers so terrified they gave up Fort Caspar with barely a fight. And I believe that Lord Osvannes and Lord Georg died at the hands of the fairy tale's protagonist."

"A-Are you sure?!" cried Lester, his eyes going wide.

"I am still putting the pieces together, so I cannot say for certain at this stage." Lester fell silent for a moment.

"Does Lady Rosenmarie know?" he asked. His voice was quieter than before. Arvin shook his head.

"Not yet. As I said, I'm still in the middle of putting the pieces together."

Everyone in the Shimmer knew about Rosenmarie's burning hatred towards the Seventh Legion for killing Osvannes. Around half their agents had even been assigned to surveilling the Seventh Legion's movements. This made it all the more important that they kept anything they learned under wraps until they were sure of it. Arvin knew far better than he liked how half-formed rumors and scraps could be less than helpful and even sow confusion instead.

"You listen to me. Even in the most incredible tales, there is always a fragment of truth. We are the Shimmer. It's our job to gather up those fragments, analyze them, and convey what we learn without omission. Outright battle is always a last resort, don't ever forget that." Arvin sounded as though he were trying to convince himself. He patted Lester on the shoulder.

"Yes, ser. I'll be sure to remember," he said. "By the way, did you see their banners?"

"I did. The lions and the seven stars. They're from the Seventh Legion, no question," replied Arvin. With Rosenmarie pressing incessantly for results, he was privately relieved that they'd at last caught their quarry's tail.

"Still, something feels off. If they were going to the north, surely they'd have headed east from here..." said Lester, frowning into the distance after the

Seventh Legion. He was correct—to reach the northern lands, they ought to advance east. Yet the Seventh Legion had instead headed west—the exact opposite direction.

“Do they mean to go to the central front?”

“What should we do?” asked Lester. Arvin thought for a moment.

“All right, I’ll follow after them with the others. Wherever they’re headed, we need to keep an eye on them in order to make a report. Sergeant Major Lester, you go back to Lady Rosenmarie with all haste and tell her we’ve found the Seventh Legion. *However,*” he said, pausing for emphasis, “remember what I said earlier and don’t mention Lord Osvannes.”

“Yes, ser!”

“Oh, also. Tell her the monster might be with them too.”

“The... Are you sure, ser?”

“We need to urge caution. Though she doesn’t seem especially interested in the monster at the moment.”

“Understood, ser,” said Lester with a salute.

“Good. Then you may go,” said Arvin. Lester wasted no time in mounting his horse and galloping off eastwards. Arvin watched him go, remembering another fallen comrade.

There’s been no word from Lieutenant Zenon since he sent word he was about to infiltrate Galia Fortress. Zenon, one of the greatest agents the Shimmer has, gone... And then there’s the monster... We need to be on our guard. He thought of the face of the girl from earlier. Even through his spyglass, she’d been so beautiful she hardly seemed real. Arvin felt a slight chill, and turned quickly to retreat back into the depths of the forest.

V

Guyel’s Work Room at Windsome Castle

Guyel returned to his work room. The advisor waiting for him there saluted him, a gesture which he returned before he moved to ease into his chair.

“Colonel Guyel, I have today’s report,” said the advisor, holding out a stack of papers. Guyel took it without a word, his eyes running swiftly through the contents. Most of it was concerned with eruptions of unrest directed at the lords they’d left to govern the conquered lands.

Lady Rosenmarie’s plan is proceeding apace. The northern lands look poised to fall to the empire even sooner than we hoped, he thought. Then he reached the final report in the pile and sighed to himself. *The hour has come at last, then. And today, of all days...* He’d only just sat down, but now he stood up again.

“You’re going out, Colonel?” asked the advisor.

“Where is Lady Rosenmarie?” asked Guyel.

“Where she always is, ser.”

“Very well. I’ll be back in an hour or so,” he announced, then left for the command room.

“It’s Colonel Guyel, my lady,” said Guyel. He opened the door to the command room and was met by a rush of stale air. Though the curtains were wide open, the window that faced onto the garden was shut tight. Guyel casually went over and opened it to let some fresh air in. He then turned to Rosenmarie, who was scribbling away in silence.

“My lady, may I have a moment of your time?” he said.

“Hm? That sounds like you, Guyel,” she replied without looking up. “Sorry, but I think you can see I’m pretty busy right now.” Irritation laced her tone. Her glossy red hair stuck out at all angles like she’d been tugging at it, making it look not unlike a bird’s nest. Rosenmarie, tall and beautiful and always dressed in men’s clothes. From maidservants to noble’s daughters, she had admirers in all corners of society. If she ever attended a ball, she’d have been surrounded by admirers in less than five minutes. That was, if she were able to tolerate such occasions.

Looks like she’s in an even worse mood than usual today, Guyel thought. His

gaze flickered to what he suspected caused her foul temper—mountains of documents that spread out over her desk and threatened to bury it entirely.

A month had passed since they defeated the Third and Fourth Legions. Since then, Rosenmarie had spent almost every minute of every day in the command room. Gaining control of nearly half of the northernmost region of Fernest all at once had spawned an insurmountable volume of paperwork. Of course, most of the work fell to civilian officials. Even now, he could hear the scratching of however many pens from the adjoining room. There were, however, a large number of issues where Rosenmarie had to make the final call herself. Furthermore, because no one could stand in for her, she had to push through it all alone. As her aide, Guyel stood ever at the ready to offer whatever advice she required.

Though of course, with her sharp intellect, my lady would never need my help. Guyel adjusted his posture to stand up straight, then delivered the news that Rosenmarie had been waiting for.

“We’ve received word from the shimmer, my lady.” The pen in Rosenmarie’s hands snapped in two with a loud *crack*. She looked up slowly. A grotesque smile stretched from one ear to the other like a gash across her face. Guyel took a step back from her, unnerved.

“And?” she said.

“Uh...y-yes, my lady. The shimmer reports they located the Seventh Legion at the town of Canalia in the south of Fernest. Around three thousand soldiers, probably an advance company sent to ascertain enemy movements. And there was one other thing.”



“One other thing?” Rosenmarie sang back at him, sounding like she was enjoying herself. *She is terrifying*, Guyel thought. He licked his chapped lips, then delivered the news he’d hesitated to give.

“My lady, this is merely the shimmer’s personal observation. There is no evidence for it,” he began. He told her of the silver-haired girl who led the Seventh Legion company—the girl who might well have been the so-called “monster.” It was all mere speculation. Still, given that the information came from a shimmer, there was probably around an eighty percent chance it was true—even if Guyel himself didn’t want to believe it.

Rosenmarie’s awful smile widened further still, and she began to cackle. “Brilliant! Trust a shimmer to get the job done!”

“There was, however, one oddity in the Seventh Legion’s movement,” Guyel said. Rosenmarie’s laughter immediately trailed off, her expression darkening.

“Oddity? What sort of oddity?”

“Rather than advancing towards the northern lands, they are instead moving west.”

“What do you mean, west? That’s completely in the wrong direction.” Rosenmarie ran a finger along her rouged lips and appeared to think for a while. Then, with a frustrated click of her tongue, she suddenly burst out, “Gladden! That decrepit, meddling old bastard...” She went on loudly insulting the marshal—although the two of them were alone in the room, Guyel glanced around, checking the corners.

“My lady, I beg you to consider your words more carefully. To insult the lord marshal in such a fashion...” he began.

“Hmph! Like it matters. It’s only you and me in this room,” spat Rosenmarie dismissively.

“Even so, my lady,” Guyel admonished her. “There are many who covet your position, and your words just now would provide them with ample evidence to oust you from the Three Generals.” Rosenmarie boasted both noble blood and strength of arms, but she wasn’t without enemies. Even at this very moment, scores of them were surely scheming on how to bring about her downfall. Of

course, such efforts were futile if the schemers did not possess the talent commensurate to a member of the Three Generals, but Guyel thought it better not to go out of their way to provide their enemies with anything that could become a liability.

“Fine, whatever. Not that I’d be heartbroken to lose my position in the Three Generals anyway, but I’m not about to step aside for that rabble either,” said Rosenmarie with a snort.

“Your understanding regarding the matter is greatly appreciated, my lady,” replied Guyel. “But moving on—you believe there is some relationship between the Seventh Legion’s movements and the lord marshal?” Rosenmarie slowly rotated her chair towards him.

“Oh, they’re related, all right,” she replied. “Southeast of the central front is Fort Peshitta, defended by the Sixth Legion. I’m pretty sure Marshal Gladden ordered Swaran to attack them.”

“I see...” Guyel said, nodding as he looked over to the map on the wall. “You think the advance company is going to the Sixth Legion’s aid?”

“I’m all but certain. He just had to go meddling in all this...” said Rosenmarie. She made another frustrated click of her tongue. Guyel realized he felt relief.

Was I afraid of the Seventh Legion’s monster...? he wondered privately. Out loud, he asked, “How do we proceed then, my lady?”

“They’re not big enough fools to ignore me entirely. If they’ve got an advance company running about, it won’t be long before their main force shows itself.”

“And you think that the main force will come to us?”

“Exactly,” said Rosenmarie with a composed nod. Her reckoning of the situation was the only natural one, and Guyel could find nothing to object to. There was a chance that the main force might make for Fort Peshitta and the central front as well, but given the current state of the war, the likelihood of that was close to zero.

“How should we handle the advance company?”

“For the time being, we do nothing. There’s the honor of the *exalted* lord

marshal to consider, as well. As much as having my prey snatched out from under me pisses me off...”

“And if...if the ‘monster’ drives off the Swaran army?” Guyel asked, feeling like he was opening a forbidden box. Rosenmarie sank back deep into her chair, her eyes drifting about in space.

“True...” she said, after some time. “Right. If that happens, I’ll send Vollmer after her,” she declared, snapping her fingers like she’d landed on a brilliant plan.

“Lieutenant Colonel Vollmer?”

“That’s right. He was just saying how he’s been spoiling for a fight. He’s just the man to test this monster’s true strength. If she can even push back the Swarans, that is.”

Vollmer’s devastating martial strength was formidable even compared to the rest of the Crimson Knights, and he carried an aura that made all around him lower their gaze. Guyel could think of no one better to put against a monster. Yet Rosenmarie’s reply had, in fact, taken him by surprise. He had been convinced she would insist on abandoning her paperwork and facing the monster herself and had prepared himself to attempt to talk her out of it with all his might. Now, he felt like he’d been tricked.

What is the lady plotting? he wondered, puzzled. Meanwhile Rosenmarie chuckled, all arrogance. Guyel himself couldn’t have been more grateful for this turn of events, but something felt off, something he couldn’t quite put a finger on. Rosenmarie had been unhealthily obsessed with the Seventh Legion ever since they killed General Osvannes. That went without saying. Yet now she was sending Vollmer against them in her stead. His uncertainty was only natural, if nothing else.

“What? You look surprised.”

“Me? No, I... Uh...” Guyel stammered, shaking his head.

“Hmmm? Did you perhaps think I’d go running off to fight the monster myself?”

“Wh-Wha...?! I... That’s...” It was as though Rosenmarie had read his

thoughts. Guyel became too flustered to string two words together. Rosenmarie watched him with a smirk.

“It’s not that complicated,” she said. “My only aim here is to crush the Seventh Legion for what they did to General Osvannes. Hunting monsters just for the fun of it doesn’t interest me. Besides, can you imagine if I went out to meet a force of merely three thousand? That’d really give the imperial citizens something to laugh about,” she said, then cackled with laughter herself.

I see. So, put simply, Lady Rosenmarie might be interested in the monster, but not because she wants to cross swords with her. At least, that’s where things stand for now, at any rate...

In any case, he was glad that she wasn’t focused on the monster.

“Sending Lieutenant Colonel Vollmer is an excellent suggestion, my lady,” he said, emphasizing his agreement before she changed her mind. “I’m sure all would agree it wouldn’t be proper for you to go yourself, monster or no.”

“Right? If Vollmer slays the monster, all well and good—we confirm it was only ever a minor threat. On the off chance he’s killed, I take my army and crush them. Simple as that.”

With that, Rosenmarie turned back to her paperwork. The motion of her pen as it ran across the page was now measured and regular, totally different from earlier. Guyel gave his unmitigated agreement, then left the command room. Just before the door closed, he caught an echo of an unhinged giggle that sent a chill down his spine.

Chapter Three: Scattering Death

I

“Why is it taking so long to conquer one damn fort?!” Field Marshal Liberal Altoria of the Royal Swaran Army bellowed at the row of officers before him. Just over a week had passed since they stormed Fort Peshitta, which was defended by the Sixth Legion. Despite their initial optimism that the fort would fall in less than three days, its gates remained tightly shut. Attempts to scale the walls directly with ladders had been beaten back before they could make it inside. Liberal crushed the letter clenched in his fist and threw it to the ground.

I’ve had it with Gladden, that old bastard. Sending an urgent messenger with this dreck. “Hurry up and take the fort or I’ll strip you of your command”? Who the hell does he think he is?! We might have been defeated and ended up a vassal to the empire, but no one talks to me like that!

One year earlier, just after Fernest lost its prized Kier Fortress, the empire had expanded the scope of its campaigns to invade the Swaran Kingdom. The hot-blooded young king, Hyde von Swaran, tore up the official letter the empire’s messenger brought him on the spot. It was a lengthy missive, but the key point was that the glorious Asvelt Empire had, in the height of arrogance, placed the Swaran Kingdom under its protection. In a blind rage, Hyde cut down the messenger and, ignoring his ministers’ remonstrations, declared that he himself would lead the army out to meet the empire.

Their clash in the Leanwell Hills, at the northernmost point of Swaran’s lands, was later dubbed the Battle of Swaran. At the hands of Georg and the Steel Chargers, the Swaran Army suffered a crushing defeat. Hyde was captured, and three days later he and most of his ministers were executed. Following this, the empire had not made Swaran part of the empire, but rather crowned the young Allen von Swaran as its new king. Swaran was still recognized as an independent nation in name, but anyone could see that Allen lacked the power to rule it. In the end, Gladden was appointed as chancellor-regent, and he now wielded

absolute power over the nation's governance from the far-off Kier Fortress.

As Liberal gnashed his teeth in rage, one officer tremulously spoke up, shrinking away he did so. "My lord, the enemy soldiers look exhausted. I think things will look up for us soon."

"‘Soon,’ ‘soon,’ all any of you can say is ‘soon!’ If memory serves, I’ve been hearing that word for three days straight. Tell me, just when is this ‘soon’ of yours, exactly?" replied Liberal, glaring at the officer. The young officer shrank away further still as he mopped at the sweat running down his face.

Although neither the officers nor Liberal himself realized it yet, after the Swaran Army's incessant assault, the Sixth Legion was, in fact, almost at their breaking point.

Sara's Room at Fort Peshitta

"Princess Sara, your dinner is ready."

Sara sat up slowly in bed and looked at the tray Roland had left on the table for her. Brown bread cut in half and water with a few scraps of vegetable matter floating in it that was supposed to be soup. Totally unfit for a princess under normal circumstances.

"Thank you, but I'm afraid I'm not hungry," she said, shaking her head and looking down to avoid Roland's anxious gaze.

"I beg your pardon, Princess, but you said the same thing six hours ago. You must eat something, or you won't regain your strength," Roland said. He showed no sign of leaving. He clearly intended to stay right where he stood until she ate something. Silence hung in the air for a brief moment, then Sara looked up to regard Roland straight on.

"In that case, I shall speak plainly," she said. "I am still a princess, and this disgusting muck turns my stomach. The very sight of it offends me. Take it away at once," she said, then flung a nearby pillow at Roland, sending a cloud of feathers fluttering into the air as it made contact. Sara grimaced, then looked away.

"Princess Sara..." said Roland, "You can play-act the fickle princess all you like.

It may work on others, but it will never fool me.”

“Wh-What do you...” Sara stammered. Roland smiled sadly.

“You are a good person, Princess. You think that anything you don’t eat yourself can be passed on to the soldiers. Is that right?”

Sara gave a derisive laugh. “Oh, Roland, your fanciful notions are becoming positively delusional. As I said, I will not eat anything not fit for a princess,” she scoffed. The look Roland gave her in response was harsher than any she’d seen until now.

“And not only that—you mean to give up your life in the end,” he said. Sara was shocked speechless as he continued. “I have served you for ten years, Your Highness. I flatter myself that I understand you well. Most likely, you intend to sacrifice yourself in exchange for the lives of your soldiers. You should not assume, however, that our enemy will accept such terms.”

“But I’m a princess—”

“So I was right, then...” sighed Roland. Sara realized her blunder too late. No number of excuses would convince him now. She decided to come forward with the truth.

“There is no other way. If there’s any possibility that my life could save everyone else’s, I have to make that gamble... Not that my last gamble paid off.”

“You mean the hope for reinforcements, Your Highness?” asked Roland. Sara nodded mutely. A week had passed since their messenger had left Fort Peshitta, and they had seen neither hide nor hair of the Seventh Legion. Sara had already made up her mind that they weren’t coming.

“We don’t... We don’t know that yet,” Roland said, but Sara could hear the faint tremor in his voice. She got up from her bed and stretched.

“I’m afraid time is already up,” she said. “Now, bring me my armor. I’ll never be able to face the House of Rivier if I’m beheaded looking like this, let alone the Royal Family.” Sara tugged on the sleeves of her nightgown and gave Roland a particularly beaming smile.

The Rear Guard of the Swaran Army

Second Lieutenant Marcel was enjoying a leisurely breakfast when a young soldier came rushing into his tent, the color drained from their face.

“What’s the racket at this hour of the morning? Has Fort Peshitta fallen at last, then?”

“N-No, ser!” replied the soldier. “The enemy is coming to surround us from behind!” Marcel spat out the bread he was chewing.

“The enemy?! You mean Fernest?!”

“Y-Yes ser! They’re flying lion banners!”

When Liberal assigned Marcel to the rear guard, he had left him with a mere five hundred soldiers. The message was that this was a mere formality, and indeed it was. Liberal had dismissed Fernest’s army as little more than a nuisance, believing that in its current state, there was no chance of reinforcements arriving. Things had been so quiet that Marcel had almost forgotten there was a war going on. Getting this news felt like being doused with a bucket of ice water.

“How many?!”

“Huh?” The soldier looked nonplussed for a moment.

“What the hell do mean, ‘huh?!’” Marcel bellowed. “Tell me how many soldiers the enemy has!”

“A-Around three...three thousand, ser!” the soldier replied, swallowing several times as they spoke.

“Three thousand...” Marcel, too, gulped loudly. It was simple arithmetic—the enemy force was six times their own. It wouldn’t even be a fight. Marcel’s thoughts went straight to retreat.

“What are your orders, ser?”

“Orders? Get ready to retreat, what else?” He thought that he should send an urgent message to the main force to call for reinforcements, but there was no time even for that now.

“You... You mean retreat back to Swaran?”

“Are you an idiot?! We rejoin the main army! Now get out of my sight and start preparations!”

“Y-Yes, ser!” The young soldier barreled out of the tent. Marcel watched them go and heaved a great sigh. A great number of promising soldiers had been lost at the Battle of Swaran, so while the main force might be better off, the rear guard was made up of green recruits with next to no experience in battle. They looked like they’d been plowing fields up ’til not so long ago.

Even if I had twice as many soldiers, I wouldn’t like my chances for victory... Marcel thought with a self-deprecating smile. He picked up his sword where it sat propped up.

When he exited the tent only a little behind the young soldier, the shock of what met his eyes struck him dumb. He understood now just how complacent he had been. Already, his company was hemmed in by enemy soldiers, who held their bows taut and ready to shoot at any moment. All his allies had their arms raised in the air.

“What happened to them?” he asked a pale-faced soldier, looking over at a number of corpses that lay in front of them. Both were cut in half, like a child’s idea of a sword fight. That was not normal.

“Th-That one did it, ser. A-Alone,” replied the soldier, lifting a trembling hand. Where he pointed, there stood a young girl so radiantly beautiful she might have come down from heaven. Blood dripped from the ebony blade in her hand. She wore the armor of Fernest’s royal army, which meant she had to be a soldier, but Marcel couldn’t quite wrap his mind around this.

That little girl killed those soldiers? And from how the others are acting, she’s their commander. Is this some kind of joke? He struggled to connect the bodies, cleaved in two, and the young girl in his mind. The girl smiled, showing white teeth, then came slowly towards him.

Eh? Marcel started. *What’s this strange sense I’m getting?*

Marcel, descended from a family of mystic seers, began to sense an unnameable aura emanating from the girl. As the distance between them

narrowed, the feeling grew stronger, until he was left struggling to hold down the fear and nausea that threatened to bubble up from his stomach. The girl stopped in front of him.

“You’re the commanding officer here?” she asked.

“That...That’s right...”

“What’s your name?”

“Ma...Marcel,” he said. It was as though the world was being swallowed by darkness.

“I’m Olivia. Nice to meet you. I actually have a favor to ask, if that’s okay.”

“At this point, we don’t really have a choice.”

Oh. I know this sense. There’s no mistaking it.

“Okay. So I want you to take us to the main force of the Swaran Army. To the commander there, if possible.”

“Very well. I’ll take you myself. In exchange, I request you spare the lives of my soldiers. Almost all of them were just farmers until the other day.”

I cannot defy this girl.

“Got it. You can rest assured that so long as they don’t resist, I won’t kill them. You know, you Swaran soldiers are much better behaved than the imperial soldiers. Everything goes so much more smoothly,” the girl said. “Right, first we all need to change so they can’t tell we’re from Fernest. Ahh, this is going to be fun! Just like the Masked Knight Shalia from my picture book!” The girl ran her finger slowly along the armor of a soldier who looked like they might burst into tears.

This girl...

II

The Main Force of the Swaran Army, Fort Peshitta

Liberal was observing the battlefield when his chief of staff came and whispered in his ear, “My lord, Second Lieutenant Marcel of the rear guard

requests an urgent audience with you.”

“What’s that? Marcel came himself instead of sending a messenger? That man... What the hell is he playing at, abandoning his post like this?”

“The Second Lieutenant says it is a matter that concerns the fate of Swaran, and was thus too crucial to entrust to a messenger.”

“The fate of Swaran?” Liberal exclaimed. “Get him in here.”

“At once, ser.”

Marcel emerged from the assembled officers, accompanied by a single soldier. They knelt, and Liberal strode over to them. Swaran might have surrendered to the empire’s authority, but it still retained the trappings of a nation. Given that a word from Gladden could change that, however, Liberal would hear what Marcel had to say for himself.

“What’ve you got to say then? What’s all this about the fate of Swaran?” he demanded. Marcel was silent.

“Have you lost your tongue? Answer me!”

“My lord,” said Marcel, looking up. “Please forgive me.”

“Forgive...? What the hell are you talking about?” Liberal demanded, but Marcel ignored him, instead addressing the soldier beside him.

“Are you satisfied? I’ve done everything you asked of me.”

“Yeah, you were great. Time for the Masked Knight Shalia to take the stage.” Without leave, and muttering something about not actually being able to get hold of a mask, the soldier stood up. She pulled off her helmet with an air of relief, and her shining silver hair fanned out before Liberal. The girl before him was so beautiful that for a moment, he found himself unable to speak. The other officers all gasped in amazement.

“‘The Masked Knight Shalia’? What’s this nonsense?” Liberal roared at Marcel, keeping one eye on the strange soldier. “I won’t stand for it! Cut the games and tell me what you know!” Marcel, however, stayed silent and would not look up. The girl soldier strolled right up to Liberal then, and suddenly she had the tip of a sword he hadn’t seen her draw pointed at his throat.

For a moment, no one understood what was happening. They all—even Liberal himself—stared at the girl and her sword as though in a dream.

“T-Traitor! Have you gone mad?!” Leinbach found his voice first, drawing his sword and pointing it at the girl soldier. The others followed suit, calling out at her and unsheathing their blades as one. Surrounded by the most formidable veteran warriors in the Swaran Army, the girl looked totally unconcerned.

“The fate of Swaran? That’s nothing to do with me,” she said with indifference. “I wanted to get defeating your army over with quickly, so I had Marcel help me out. That’s all.” As she finished, a tumult of voices erupted once more from around them.

“You dog! You double-crossed us?!” cried Leinbach. The girl soldier’s eyes went wide.

“What? I’m not double-crossing anyone—I’m not a Swaran soldier. I’m Major Olivia Valedstorm of Fernest. Otherwise known as...the Masked Knight Shalia!” She made a silly, flourishing gesture, her sword still at Liberal’s neck. Unable to move for fear his throat would be slit, Liberal turned just his head towards Marcel.

“I suppose you had your reasons for obeying this head case, but you’ve misplayed,” he said. “I’m just one soldier—I’ll never surrender to save my own skin! Don’t think you can use me as a shield.” It wasn’t Marcel who answered, however.

“Oh, really? I mean, that’s fine with me,” said Olivia. “Things will just take a little longer. Though the other humans don’t seem to feel the same way...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Liberal looked around and saw the anger had drained from the faces of his officers. They now looked troubled.

“What are you fools doing? Forget me! Kill the traitors!”

“I can’t, ser,” said Leinbach. “Your death will only further seal Swaran’s doom. And King Allen... King Allen depends on you, my lord.” Leinbach slackened his grip on his sword, dropping it on the ground. One by one, the others surrounding them followed suit.

“You...” Liberal was at a loss.

“You have won. We will not fight you. Now will you release Lord Liberal?” said Leinbach, admitting defeat. Olivia gave two satisfied nods.

“Swaran humans really are so well behaved—I appreciate it. Once I confirm you’ve totally withdrawn your forces, of course I’ll release him. If you try anything tricky, though...” In a flash, Olivia produced a knife from her belt and without looking threw it back over her shoulder. Almost simultaneously, a soldier holding a bow fell out of the tree behind her. The knife, engraved with the lion of Fernest, had embedded itself deep in his forehead. The blood of all assembled ran cold.

“...you’ll end up like this human here, never eating tasty food again,” Olivia finished with a bewitching smile. She held everyone in the palm of her hand now.

“Princess Sara, I beg you to reconsider!” Roland called out from behind Sara as she climbed the staircase.

“I cannot. If I do not act now, we may lose the chance to even surrender. It will only hold any meaning while we are still able to offer resistance,” she replied, and stepped out onto the fort battlements. She could hardly believe what met her eyes.

“What in the world...?” she gasped. As though in answer, a single soldier came running up to her, out of breath.

“The enemy is retreating, General!”

“I can see that, I just... Were we able to deal the enemy some decisive loss?”

“Ah... No, ser. Actually, our forces weren’t really able to do...” Sara listened without paying attention as the soldier fumbled for words, and looked once more to the scene beyond the walls. After a week of fierce battle, the Swaran army was now retreating in solemn silence.

What could possibly have happened? Sara watched them leave, hardly able to breathe. Little by little, the reason became apparent. Taking the place of the Swaran army were banners emblazoned with seven stars and lions.

“Princess Sara, that’s...that’s the Seventh Legion.” Roland stood beside her.

His voice was hoarse with strong emotion.

“It seems so,” she replied. A cheer rose up from the soldiers, and Sara felt the tears begin to run down her cheeks.

The gate opened, and Sara stepped forward to welcome the Seventh Legion herself. The first thing that caught her eye was a young girl who for some reason was dressed in Swaran armor. Even Sara, who had seen as many beautiful young ladies at the palace as there were stars in the sky, was struck by the girl’s loveliness.

The girl noticed her, and came hurrying over.

“Might you be Lieutenant General Sara of the Sixth Legion?”

“Yes. I’m Sara,” she replied. The girl saluted.

“I’m Major Olivia Valedstorm, commanding the Independent Cavalry Regiment of the Seventh Legion!” she announced, then gave Sara a friendly smile.

“Major Olivia?” Sara echoed. “That’s right, there were rumors...”

Olivia’s name had reached Sara before. At this point, her reputation was such that even the residents of the palace knew of her. Sara had hoped to have the chance to meet her one day, but never dreamed it would be under circumstances like these. As she goggled at Olivia, the other girl took a wide stance and raised her left arm.

“Otherwise known as the Masked Knight Shalia!” she pronounced, looking pleased with herself. Unsure what to make of this, Sara only stared.

“Major!” came a piercing voice. Another woman walked briskly towards them. “You must not behave like that in the presence of Princess Sara!” Introducing herself as Claudia Jung, she turned to Sara and bowed deeply. Olivia’s shoulders rose to her ears, and she stuck her tongue out. Sara, shaking off her bemusement, let out a snort of laughter. She knew the Masked Knight Shalia well. As a child, she had read and reread the tale of the brave young knight, never once tiring of it. That picture book had been the most formative element of her childhood.

Come to think of it, Shalia did make that strange gesture every time she introduced herself, Sara thought as she remembered the pose Olivia had struck, and another burst of laughter escaped her. Claudia bowed and apologized again.

“Please, don’t worry about it,” said Sara. “I love the Masked Knight Shalia.”

“No way?! Um, I mean—is that true, ser?!” Olivia cried, closing in on Sara with fervor in her eyes. Sara took the other girl’s hand and squeezed it to show her gratitude.

“It is,” she said. “In fact, it’s because I loved Shalia so much that I first picked up a sword.”

“That’s so cool!” Olivia was grinning from ear to ear.

“On that note, you must forgive me for being so late to deliver my thanks. We are indebted to you for your aid in liberating us from a truly desperate situation.”

“Thank you for the kind words, ser!”

“But you must tell me—how did you persuade the Swaran Army to withdraw?” asked Sara, giving voice to the question that burned within her. Olivia’s regiment didn’t look like it had the numbers to drive them away. Olivia puffed up her chest, and began to cheerfully recount what had happened.

“You...you went into the enemy camp alone?” Sara asked when Olivia was finished. She struggled to string the words together. Olivia had not only infiltrated the enemy command alone, but taken their commander hostage and forced their army to retreat—a feat unimaginable for any ordinary person. Roland and the others stared at Olivia like she was of some as-yet-undiscovered species. Sara had heard the rumors of Olivia’s exploits, and now felt overcome with awe to have witnessed the real thing.

“What became of the captured enemy commander?”

“He’s over there. Claudia?” Olivia called out. Claudia went to where several soldiers stood bound with ropes and brought an indignant-looking man forward to stand before Sara.

“If that girl hadn’t shown up, it’d be you scum tied up right now!” he spat at her.

“Yes, I imagine you’re right,” replied Sara. He was perfectly correct—she’d been on the verge of surrendering, after all. Though she only meant to convey her genuine agreement, the man didn’t seem to take it like that. As she watched, his face turned deep scarlet, and he twisted violently against his restraints. Soldiers hurried to subdue him, then Olivia walked over and whispered something in his ear.

“...okay?” she finished. The man’s face instantly went from scarlet to a pallid gray. He stopped struggling, and Olivia gave a satisfied nod before patting him comfortingly on the shoulder.

“Once you’ve confirmed the enemy’s full retreat, ser, please release this human. I promised we would, you see. As for us, we’ll be setting off again at once.”

“I really am incredibly grateful to you. As a member of the royal family, I ought to offer you some reward, but I’m afraid...well, you see the state we’re in,” Sara said apologetically, looking back at the battered and broken fort. She wasn’t prepared for what Olivia said next.

“Okay, then how about next time, we talk about the Masked Knight Shalia together—ser!” she added hastily at the end.

“That’s...that’s all?” It was such a paltry request for such a splendid victory. Sara repeated the question, but Olivia insisted that that was enough. Sara, though confused, swore that it would be so.

Several days after the fighting ended at Fort Peshitta, a shimmer report reached Rosenmarie, outlining what had occurred. She summoned a delighted Vollmer, and ordered him to sortie and attack the enemy.

III

The Desert Town of Sephin

After liberating the Sixth Legion, the Independent Cavalry Regiment made

their way to their true destination, the desert town of Sephin. They stayed in the town, refreshing their water and food supplies and gathering intelligence.

“It’s been three whole days since we got to Sephin, but the imperial army still doesn’t look like it’ll move any time soon,” said Claudia, daintily slicing up the meat on the plate before her. Olivia, meanwhile, stuffed her mouth with reckless abandon.

“Mm, thoth rath ah thtill thcuwwying abow, thow,” she replied, unintelligible through a mouthful of meat. Claudia carefully placed her knife and fork down and heaved a deep, pointed sigh.

“Major, what do I always tell you? You must finish your mouthful before you speak,” she said, looking coldly at Olivia. Olivia nodded, chewing hard. Ashton watched them out of the corner of his eye, opting to quietly eat his own dinner without interjecting. Privately, though, he’d had it up to here with Olivia’s total lack of improvement, no matter how often she was corrected.

“You know, I didn’t think it’d be this easy getting a table at dinnertime,” he mused. A tavern called Meridia of the Desert lay near the gates of Sephin and was well known throughout the town for its excellent cooking. An array of dishes featuring seasonal fish and vegetables was piled high upon the table. None of it would have been out of place in the famous kitchens of the capital, yet many of the other tables around them were empty.

Sephin had a long and storied history, and for generations, it had prospered as an important trading town. The road known as the Starry Highway ran north to south through the central region, well-known as the only source for sand crystals. These crystals were said to fetch a price as high as gemstones, and in the common parlance they were known as “stardust.” From spring through summer, sand crystals of the highest quality could be harvested, and merchants flocked to barter for them. Ashton still remembered his parents’ cries of delight when, during his childhood, sand crystal rings had been in vogue amongst the young ladies of the nobility. While they were not as popular as they had once been, sand crystals were still a rarity. This unexpected scarcity of people in such a location puzzled him.

“We’re not so far from the northern lands here. The merchants were probably

afraid that the empire would show up and fled. If it comes down to being rich or being alive, that's hardly a choice at all," Claudia answered briskly.

"Oh, yes. That makes sense," said Ashton. He watched as she cut another piece of meat, every gesture the very picture of elegance as she raised her fork to her mouth. In stark contrast, a fishtail protruded from the corner of Olivia's mouth. Now Ashton remembered the relief on the faces of the people he'd passed in the street.

So that's why the captain was so welcoming... he thought, finally grasping the reason the captain of the town guard had gone out their way to help them, even offering to shoulder any costs they incurred during their stay. Now he saw that this was motivated by the desire for them to stay longer. It wasn't unreasonable—there were only around two hundred soldiers in Sephin. A wall of clay bricks encircled the town, but it wouldn't hold off a serious attack from the imperial army. Now this three-thousand-strong regiment had shown up—a force more than capable of defending the town. Ashton couldn't blame them for getting their hopes up. In the end, however, they couldn't remain here forever. They were done refreshing their supplies, and once the scouts sent to survey the area for enemy movements returned, they would be off again. They had to get going to the Emaleid Citadel soon—tomorrow, if possible.

The veil of night settled over the land, and the moon rose, its dim light filtering through drifting clouds.

"All the food was so good!" said Olivia as the three of them got up to leave.

"I never thought I'd eat fresh fish in the middle of the desert," Claudia said.

"Not that it matters, but Olivia, you eat too much," added Ashton. He was mortified when, just as they stepped outside, the proprietor came out with all the staff to see them off.

"Please come back any time!" they called with a cheerful smile and a wave. Ashton forced a polite smile, then, desperate to get away, walked quickly off towards the lodgings the guard captain had arranged for them.

Now that I think about it, our rooms are far too nice. The kind of place a wealthy merchant would stay... He pictured the four-story building of red brick.

Then, with a jolt, he realized Olivia wasn't beside him anymore.

"Wait, where did Olivia go?"

"Huh?" Claudia looked over. "Oh, for... Now where's she gone off to?" Muttering about how after the drama over choosing a name Olivia must have developed a habit for giving her the slip, Claudia cast her eyes over their surroundings. Ashton did the same, but he couldn't see Olivia anywhere. The meager light cast by the moon made searching almost impossible.

"Well, she'll come back when she gets hungry."

"I'm sure she'll come back when she gets hungry."

Ashton and Claudia spoke at the same time. They looked at each other, and couldn't help but share a smile.

Around the same time, on the outskirts of town, Olivia was facing off against a man dressed entirely in black.

"You picked up on me from that distance? So you *did* see us last time, damn you," Arvin said through his mask.

The girl sighed deeply. "It's not like I had to 'pick up' on anything with you scurrying about right under my nose."

"Funny. I don't remember coming anywhere near you, you little brat." Ever since the incident at Canalia, Arvin had been on his guard, observing the Independent Cavalry Regiment from the farthest limit of his spyglass's range. Lester disagreed, but Arvin didn't think it was a good idea to get too close without taking adequate precautions. Yet despite all that effort, the girl had noticed him the moment she left that tavern. When their eyes met through the lens of the spyglass, a chill of terror had shot down his spine.

"Huh. Well, whatever. Now, that black outfit with the black mask. I met someone dressed like that back at Galia Fortress. You're a rat like him, right?"

"Oh? Shimmers are all rats to you, then?" said Arvin. "And so what if I am?" As they talked, he became certain that Zenon was dead. Zenon would never have allowed anyone who'd seen him to walk away. That one such person

stood before him now was indisputable evidence.

“I mean, whatever. It just gets on my nerves when you keep popping up, so I came to squash you. You seem to be multiplying too. Rats, right? You look away for a second, and suddenly there’s more of them,” the girl said; then she unsheathed her sword and looked over at the trees, her eyes running over the dense green. There was no wind, but the faint rustling of leaves could be heard in the darkness.

“Kill her!” As Arvin screamed the order, four shimmers came leaping from the branches at Olivia. Even in the face of a sudden attack from above, she didn’t panic. She crouched down, then leapt.

“Wha?!!!” The shocked voices of the four shimmers rang out together. In the blink of an eye, the girl had gone from the ground to standing upon a bough high above their heads. Anyone would be shocked.

“Your enemy’s worst blind spot is right above their head, true. Still, you can’t get cocky just because you got above them. It’s always possible someone might come around and get above *you*. Z always reminded me of that.” No one had anything to say to this lecture. One by one, the Shimmer agents dropped dead, their heads split open. The wet thump as each corpse hit the ground sounded to Arvin like fruit being squashed. As the last one collapsed, the girl leapt lightly down from the trees. With a bold sweep of her black blade wrapped in a dark mist, fresh blood mixed with brain matter splattered across the ground.

“Leaping freakishly high, and swinging that sword faster than the eye can see... I can certainly see why they call you a monster,” Arvin said.

“I’m not a monster. My name’s Olivia. Seriously, why does everyone call me a monster?” Olivia asked, tilting her head. Arvin just snorted with laughter. After the superhuman performance Olivia had just given, he couldn’t think of anything else to say. By all rights, he should have been tidying up the aftermath of their attack right now. Instead, the corpses of the other shimmers lay strewn in front of him, and instead of lying dead on the ground, the girl was standing there on her own two feet. *I can see how she killed Zenon*, he thought, slowly moving his left hand towards the steel whip coiled at his waist.

Right. All the highly trained agents I brought along just in case were

slaughtered in an instant. Definitely time to get out of here. But...

As Arvin had told Lester, intelligence was a shimmer's primary duty. Violence was always a last resort.

But...

He crouched ever so slightly, and shifted his weight onto his right foot. He watched Olivia, smiling as she looked back at him. Her uncanny black sword hung at her side, as though the fight was already over.

...but if I'm going to run... I'm wiping that smirk off her face first!

Arvin's arm rose up in a powerful swing, and the whip followed, undulating as he released it to fly at Olivia's face. A fraction of a second before the curved blade reached her, Olivia twisted slightly, and dodged.

Just like I thought. After what I saw of your abilities, I'd be more shocked if you didn't dodge, Arvin thought. *But you should have parried. Against this weapon, dodging is a fatal mistake!* His hand that held the whip twitched to the right. The whip's trajectory shifted, coming around behind Olivia—

"Wow, that's a great weapon. I've never seen one like it before." The steel whip slid from Arvin's hand, smashed to pieces from blade to handle. The base of Olivia's hand dug into his belly.

"Wha... How...?"

"Hm?"

"How...how did you know I'd attack from behind?" Unless she had eyes in the back of her head, there was no way she could have avoided that strike. Arvin struggled to hold on to his fading consciousness.

Olivia brought her lips to his ear, and whispered, "You poured too much of your bloodlust into your weapon. Even a sleeping pigeon would have dodged that."

What the hell is she talking about? Arvin thought, as his mind faded to black.

The Silver Moon Inn

Is that the time already? Claudia thought. *The major sure is taking her time... What can she possibly be up to? And where could she have gotten to?*

Two hours had passed since Claudia and Ashton arrived back at the inn. After vanishing without a trace earlier, Olivia was still nowhere to be seen. Claudia shut her book, contemplating whether she should go and look for her, when she heard rapid footsteps from the corridor. They stopped directly outside her door.

“Excuse me, Miss Claudia!” came the servant’s panicked voice as they rapped on the door. “It’s Miss Olivia! She’s... She’s...!” Claudia stood up and hurried to the door—this boded nothing but ill. The servant stood there, gray-faced and quivering.

“Has something happened to Major Olivia?” Claudia demanded.

“Oh, thank goodness. I... Oh, dear. Please come with me!” said the servant before scurrying away without waiting for a reply. Ashton, alerted by the commotion, came out to join Claudia, and they both hurried to follow the servant down to the entrance.

“Oh! Claudia, Ashton, I’m back!” Olivia called when they got there, waving cheerfully despite the fact that she was covered in blood. Beside her, a man dressed all in black lay facedown on the ground. The slight rise and fall of his chest indicated that he wasn’t dead, at least. The servant, apparently having seen to their task, fled back to the kitchen.

“Major?! What happened?!” Claudia cried. She flew to Olivia’s side and began running her hands all over the other girl, leaving no part of her unchecked. To her immense relief, Olivia was uninjured. The blood must have all come from her opponent.

“Is she hurt?” Ashton asked. Claudia looked back and shook her head. Ashton’s whole body sagged with relief, and he sank to the ground.

“Claudia, quit it already! That tickles!” said Olivia, twisting away.

“As if I care about that! You disappear without a word and the next thing I know, you’re covered in blood... And why do you have this suspicious masked man with you?” In her panic, she hadn’t noticed before, but now she saw that

the man's face was hidden by a black mask. Black mask and black clothes—this was clearly no ordinary towns person.

“Um, well. He's a shimmer rat.”

“Shimmer...?” Claudia paused. “Like, from the Imperial Intelligence Division? That Shimmer?!”

Claudia knew of the shimmers. They boasted both outstanding reconnaissance skills and formidable combat abilities. She looked back down at the one collapsed before her.

“Huh,” said Olivia, narrowing her eyes. “This is what passes for an intelligence agent? I'd never have guessed after how bad they were at hide-and-seek.” She prodded the man's head with her toes.

“Not that I don't believe you, but... You're sure he's a shimmer?”

“Yeah, that's what he said, so I'm pretty sure it's true,” said Olivia, cackling. As far as Claudia was concerned, however, this was no laughing matter.

It can't be a coincidence that a shimmer was hanging around here. Could it be... No, there's no question. They were definitely watching us, she thought. Later, she would find out the details. Right now, it was clear at least that Olivia had captured the shimmer on the ground before her. She called Ashton over and ordered him to tie the man to a pillar to prevent him escaping.

“Now, ser. If I may be so bold,” Claudia said, turning to Olivia with a smile. “Just how is it that you came to capture a shimmer?” Rage at Olivia burned hot inside her. Olivia, looking a little nervous, hurried to explain what had happened. When she had finished, Claudia's smile grew wider.

“Thank you, Major. I see what happened now. To summarize, you've been aware that we were being watched ever since we left Canalia—is that right?”

Olivia nodded her head emphatically. She wasn't totally sure why, but Claudia was really scaring her. At times like this, she'd learned, it was best to do as she was told. She did love to learn.

“You couldn't have informed me of that a little earlier?” asked Claudia.

“Erm... I *did* say I saw a rat...” Olivia protested in the smallest of voices.

Claudia's smile stretched to its limit. Her face reminded Olivia of a Yaksha—a demon from her picture book that brandished a knife in one hand, cackling with laughter and swinging its hair about as it pursued unlucky humans. It was genuinely terrifying. Olivia remembered how one night, unable to get the Yaksha out of her mind, she'd built a fort out of her bedding to stand guard in case it came to get her.

"How am I supposed to understand a ridiculous code word like 'rat'?" Claudia bellowed. Olivia shrank away from her, then looked over at Ashton, who was clumsily securing the man in black to a pillar, in a silent plea for backup. He looked guiltily away from her.



She had no allies here.

“Claudia, just hear me out before you get mad, okay?” she said. “I was going to kill them all, but then part way through I was like, ‘This could help us get information!’ So I left one alive and brought him back here. I did good, right?” Olivia puffed her chest up with pride.

Claudia exhaled heavily. Olivia had heard once that sighing too much would drain someone of all their happiness, and the thought of telling Claudia this crossed her mind. Right now, though, she thought that it would probably just make Claudia even angrier, so she decided against it.

“Well, what’s done is done,” Claudia muttered. “You’re right. A shimmer will probably have some useful intelligence, though I doubt he’ll give it up easily.” She glanced at the shimmer. Olivia got the sense she was off the hook and let out a little breath of relief. She decided that next time she’d say “bug” instead of “rat,” to make it easier for Claudia to understand.

A small moan came from across the room.

“O-Olivia! I think he’s awake,” said Ashton, scrambling away from the shimmer, who slowly looked up, shaking his head groggily.

“Guess I got captured, eh?” he said, looking around the room then at his own bound hands. He smiled, displaying no sign of fear. “Why didn’t you just kill me there and then, you monster? It shouldn’t have been much trouble for you.”

“I’m not a monster,” said Olivia. “I *told* you, my name is Olivia. First question: what’s your name?” With this, she pulled off the shimmer’s mask.

He screwed up his face as it was exposed, but answered nevertheless. “Zoeh.”

“Well, Zoeh, I’ve got a few que—”

“Just a moment, Major,” Claudia cut her off. She crouched down in front of the shimmer, then stared deep into his eyes. There was a long pause before Claudia said, “He’s lying. I’m absolutely sure of it.” She stood up again with a dismissive snort.

Olivia laughed. “You don’t say! Your eyes are coming in handy as usual—a gift from the heavens, just like I said.” She turned back to the shimmer and ran a

finger from his forehead down to his chin. “Let’s try that again. Could you tell us your name?”

A tremor ran through the man’s body. “My name’s Arvin,” he spat. Olivia looked at Claudia.

“He’s telling the truth this time,” she confirmed, to Arvin’s unconcealed shock. Ashton, meanwhile, looked from Olivia to Claudia, utterly lost.

“Okay, Arvin, I’ve got a few questions for you, if you don’t mind,” Olivia started again. “Oh, and if you answer honestly, we’ll let you go.”

“Major!” protested Claudia. “You can’t just—”

“It’ll be fine,” said Olivia, cutting her off. The shimmer chuckled darkly.

“I don’t get the feeling your friend is going to let me scurry away,” he said, with another fearless grin. He seemed to have gotten some of his composure back.

“Don’t worry. I keep my word. So how about it?” Olivia prompted. In reality, she wasn’t particularly concerned about whether he accepted or not. If he didn’t, she’d just stab him in the face with her ebony blade and that would be that. Z would be happy to get another meal. As far as Olivia was concerned, there were no downsides either way.

Arvin seemed to waver with indecision, until at last he broke his silence. “All right. What do you want to know?” Claudia’s eyes widened with surprise.

“First off, would you mind explaining why you were following us?”

Arvin snorted. “That’s it? No, I don’t mind at all. We’re tracking the Seventh Legion.”

“Is that because of how we captured Fort Caspar?” Olivia asked. Arvin made a show of looking impressed.

“Well, well! Quite the detective work there. Yes, the commander who conquered the northern lands isn’t very happy with the Seventh Legion after you destroyed the Southern Division of the Imperial Army. If that’s all you’ve got for me, it’s high time for you to get out of here and head north to meet your death.” His mouth twisted and he added, with a snicker, “If a monster can even

die, that is.”

Olivia frowned at this, but the voice that came from beside her was utterly furious.

“Keep calling the major ‘monster’ and see where it gets you, scum!” shouted Claudia, brandishing her fist at Arvin. She was beside herself with rage. Even Ashton, who was always so meek, wore an expression of fury that Olivia had never seen before. Taken aback by the intensity of their reaction, she forced a smile.

“Claudia, Ashton, it’s fine. I don’t care, really.”

“Perhaps you don’t, ser,” said Claudia. “But I do!” She swung her fist down towards Arvin’s face with all her strength. Just before she made contact, Olivia caught her arm.

“Major...” Claudia’s eyes burned with protest. Really, Olivia wouldn’t have minded if Claudia hit him. She just didn’t want him to get knocked out again.

“Well, who’d have thought?” said Arvin goadingly. “The monster understands the ways of the human heart!”

Before Claudia could get a retort out, Ashton fixed Arvin with an icy glare and said, “Olivia, I think it’s best we killed him here, don’t you? He’s of no more use now we’ve got the information we need from him.”

Olivia chuckled. “That kind of talk doesn’t suit you, Ashton.” She drew her ebony blade with a smile, before bringing it down at Arvin. The rope that bound him fell softly to the floor, leaving him sitting there, totally unharmed.

“I didn’t think you’d actually let me go,” he said. He stood up unsteadily, flexing his limbs as though checking to ensure they still worked.

“I told you I’d keep my word. But more importantly, could you take a message to your commander for me?” Olivia asked.

Arvin stared at her for a moment. “What is it?”

“‘I’m coming to kill you, so you’d better keep your neck squeaky clean until I get there.’ Tell her just like that, okay?” Olivia said with a thin smile. Arvin grimaced, but nodded.

“Uh... Right. I’ll make sure she gets it.”

“Thanks, Arvin!” Olivia said. With that, keeping an eye on Olivia’s sword as he went, Arvin slunk out of the Silver Moon Inn.

“Are you sure about this, Major?” asked Claudia. She eyed the open door with an ugly expression, her anger still simmering at the surface. The idea that someone had been so angry on her behalf made Olivia feel warm and fuzzy inside.

“Yep,” she replied. “We know what our enemy is after now. It’s proof that Ashton’s hunch was right too. Our tactician knew best after all.” She directed a little round of applause at Ashton, who scratched his neck, embarrassed.

“But Olivia,” he said, “did you have to send such a provocative message? You’ll just aggravate this commander even more.”

“I thought so too,” agreed Claudia.

“Well, I figured if I said it like that,” Olivia explained, “even if it makes her mad, she’ll at least wait for us to get there. It sounds like this commander is a bit obsessed with us.”

“In other words, you eliminated the possibility of the northern division of the imperial army advancing on the central lands, like we’d feared...”

“Yes! And that right there is how you do strategy!” said Olivia proudly, holding up a finger. Battles weren’t all about swords and muscle. If you had the chance, it was far better to throw your opponent off-balance with words. Ashton folded his arms and nodded, looking impressed.

“Right,” continued Olivia. “Moving around so much has made me hungry.” She rubbed her belly and looked towards the kitchen. Her eyes met those of a servant who’d been watching the whole scene from behind a table, who made a funny squawking noise.

“Oh, for... Everything’s always on your schedule, isn’t it, Major?” said Claudia. “I’ll have them get dinner ready for you.”

Olivia made a grumbling noise, and said, “But I’d rather have a sandwich with Ashton’s homemade mustard...”

“You what?” said Ashton. “Come on, the food they make here is far better.”

“I don’t care. I want a sandwich *you* made,” Olivia insisted. A dopey smile came over Ashton’s face.

“Oh, all right then,” he said. “I’ll make it right now.” He trotted off towards the kitchen, looking elated. “Excuse me!” he called out. “Could I use the kitchen for a minute?”

“O-Of course! Take as long as you need!” stammered the servant, then made a mad dash from the kitchen towards the stairs. Claudia watched them go, then gave Olivia a light shove.

“All right, ser. While Ashton gets that sandwich ready, you should put some fresh clothes on. You’ll scare the other guests looking like that.”

“Yeah, good idea!” Olivia said cheerfully, then skipped off back to her room.

IV

Chancellor Darmés’s Work Room at Listelein Castle in Orsted

The work room of Imperial Chancellor Darmés was, in accordance with his position, dizzyingly lavish. Its uncharacteristic size stood out, first and foremost; it could have accommodated a hundred visitors all at once. It had vast windows angled so that the room was filled with sunlight and framed by thick scarlet curtains embroidered with gold thread. Expensive vases and paintings decorated the space, and before a white wall sat a stately and elegant desk.

“That concludes my report, my lord,” said a woman dressed all in black.

“Very good. I must say, though, the Swarans must be even more spineless than I thought if they couldn’t even take this one fort.”

“It may not be their fault, my lord. They say this monster everyone’s been talking about came to the Sixth Legion’s aid,” the woman replied darkly. She was not a shimmer, but rather the leader of Darmés’s personal secret intelligence service—the Dawnlight Network. Her name was Mistress Flora Ray.

“The monster, you say...” murmured Darmés.

“My lord?”

“What? Oh, it’s nothing. You may go.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Oh, and make sure no one comes near my rooms.”

“Understood, my lord,” said Flora. Darmés watched her close the door behind her, then turned to the towering bookshelf on his right. Perhaps the most imposing object in the room, it gave off an almost religious aura.

Time for my report, then, he thought. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a red book, then went over to the bookshelf. Right in the center, there was an unusual gap, just the right size for a single book. Darmés gazed for a moment at the book in his hand, then slotted it into the gap. There was a loud click as some mechanism slid into place; then, with a heavy creaking, the bookshelf began to slide to one side. It ground to a stop, revealing a staircase that led underground.

Darmés lit the lamp that hung at the entrance, using it to light his way as he set off down the spiral staircase. He still almost stumbled several times along the way, but eventually made it safely to the bottom, emerging into a round, stone-walled room. It was as empty as the void, in stark contrast to the luxury up above.

Darmés went around lighting the candles that lined the wall. As the room gradually grew brighter, Darmés’s shadow grew darker and more pronounced. When all the candles had been lit, he moved to the center of the room and prostrated himself, pressing his forehead against the floor. His shadow writhed, then stretched out before him, twisting like a living thing, growing and contracting, until it reformed into a humanoid figure.

Rise, Darmés. Looming over the bowed figure of the chancellor stood a shadow, shimmering like the air above a flame.

“Y-Y-Yes, Exalted One!” Darmés looked up, keeping his posture deferential. “I trust I find you well, great Xenia—”

Desist with the tiresome formalities and get to the point, said the shadow in a voice that seemed to bubble up from the pits of hell. *I have no patience for*

human communication. I can barely understand your babbling as it is. Darmés shrank away from the shadow.

“F-Forgive me...” he stammered.

What are you here for? asked Xenia tonelessly. Darmés, whose talents lay in reading others’ emotions and turning them to his own advantage, was helpless against Xenia, who, being a shadow, naturally had no expressions to read. Even if it did, Darmés could do nothing against this inhuman opponent who could crush him with a single glance. He swallowed to try and wet his bone-dry throat before continuing.

“I have received a report concerning that ebony blade you were so interested in.”

I see, said Xenia. *You may continue.*

“A number of witnesses stated that the sword in question emits a kind of black mist. The mage’s analysis suggested that the blade has some kind of enchantment on it,” Darmés said. Xenia’s form shivered slightly, but otherwise it did not react. Darmés mopped the sweat from his brow. “Great Xenia?” he asked.

Let me correct you on one point, it hissed. *That black mist is no cheap trick like your “magic.”* For a moment, Darmés was unable to speak. While he didn’t blindly accept everything written in the Holy Illuminatus Church’s White Book, he knew that mages truly existed and that their magic could achieve superhuman feats. He couldn’t fathom how Xenia could brush those arts aside as mere “cheap tricks.”

After a long pause, he found his tongue again. “May...May I ask what you mean?”

I mean what I say, said Xenia, leaving Darmés more at a loss than ever.

“I beg your pardon, Exalted One, but I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Is it necessary that I explain myself to you further? If it would somehow benefit me, I have no objection to doing so, of course...

“Of course not, Exalted One!” Darmés cried. “I was a fool to suggest it. Forgive

my speaking out of turn.” He pressed himself back to the floor as though to kiss the ground where Xenia stood. The silence stretched on until at last Xenia ordered him to rise.

That being said, I am sure you are curious. I shall share some of my knowledge with you.

“Knowledge of the Abyss!” Darmés exclaimed breathlessly. “O Exalted One, I would be grateful for any scrap you might impart to one so unworthy.” The knowledge Xenia possessed was so valuable it couldn’t be measured in gold. Darmés strained his ears to be sure not to miss a single word.

That ebony blade was, I believe, crafted by one of my kin. That is why it emits that black mist.

“You mean to say that the black mist is not a magical phenomenon, but rather the product of the arts of your most exalted kinsfolk?” asked Darmés, choosing his words with care. He had once seen Xenia snap its fingers and cause a whole mountain to vanish before his eyes. A human speaking out of turn wouldn’t last an instant.

That is correct, confirmed Xenia. The human who wields that sword is its plaything.

“P...Plaything?”

It is...eccentric. It takes in humans to entertain itself, claiming to “observe” them.

“‘Observe,’ you say...” Darmés, realizing the impending danger, continued. “In that case, I must send out an order for our forces to stand down at once.” He didn’t want a poorly thought-out move putting him on the wrong side of one of Xenia’s kind. He could only assume they all possessed similar abilities.

Don’t bother. You may leave the plaything be.

“But why?” pressed Darmés. “For all that this plaything is human, are they not one of your allies?” As a god of death, Xenia might well go around talking about humans as playthings, but one of Xenia’s kin had entrusted its sword to this human. As this thought passed through Darmés’s mind, Xenia’s body roiled like a violent wave. The flames of the candles blazed as though to echo this motion.

“G-Great Xenia?!”

Have you listened to a word I said? I spoke not of my kin, but of its plaything. Or have humans taken to insulting my kin while my attention wandered?

“F-Forgive me!” wailed Darmés, attempting to prostrate himself again, but his body wouldn’t obey him. He couldn’t move even a single finger. Cold sweat poured from every pore on his body.

Stop doing that. Just watching you makes me irritable, said Xenia, holding a shimmering hand out towards Darmés.

“For...give m-me... I won’t...disap...point you...again...” croaked Darmés, straining to pronounce every syllable. Xenia lowered its hand, and Darmés felt his control over his limbs return. Gasping for breath, he pressed his arms into the ground to prevent himself from toppling over.

See that you do not, said Xenia. *Now, keep up your work in drawing out this war. That is what I gave you power for. Deliver more humans unto death.*

“Of course, Exalted One! With my every waking moment, I strive to serve you!” cried Darmés. “My powers have rendered the emperor no better than a puppet. The tides of the war are mine to turn as I choose.”

This pleases me. What of the Chalice of Darkness?

“It proceeds well. The Chalice is already a third full,” replied Darmés. The ebony chalice he kept in his room already contained a multitude of souls. To the naked eye, it looked like any other goblet, so he left it on display with the other ornaments.

Very good, said Xenia, with a nod that suggested satisfaction.

“Great Xenia, I... Might I...” Darmés stammered, half rising. Xenia reached a languid hand into an unseen pocket and drew forth a clear vial full of a rainbow-colored liquid. It shone with dazzling intensity, plainly not of the natural world.

Do not fear. When the Chalice of Darkness brims with souls, you shall have your Elixir of Cursed Souls, just as I promised, said Xenia. *Though you must be half out of your mind yourself, to desire such a substance.*

“Thank you, Exalted One! I will see to it that the chalice grows still fuller!”

See that it is so, said Xenia shortly, before fading into nothing. Darmés stood up and brushed the creases from his robe.

Out of my mind? he thought. *Well, the great Xenia can't be expected to understand what this means when your life span is as short as a human's.* Darmés, of course, aspired to conquer all of Duvedirica. But like every living thing, human or otherwise, he was shackled by the certainty of death. Even if he brought every domain on the continent under his rule, the longest he could hope to hold onto power was a few scant decades. What Darmés wanted was to rule Duvedirica for all eternity. The only thing that could grant him his mad ambition was this self-titled “god of death”—a being beyond human understanding—and the rainbow elixir it claimed could make him immortal.

Death god, demon—it made no difference to Darmés. He would have served anyone to get his hands on the substance. And if sacrifices were required, he'd happily offer up a hundred thousand souls or more. He had no idea what purpose the human souls he gathered would be used for, but he had decided such knowledge was beyond the reach of mortals. Besides, humans were born in such numbers that the world was lousy with them anyway. When he was alone, Darmés liked to entertain himself by imagining his new empire built upon a mountain of corpses.

The war looked like it might be drawing to a close, but thanks to this girl they all call monster, it will keep going a long time yet. Keep swinging that ebony blade, my dear. It only brings the day that I dominate Duvedirica closer. Darmés lingered in that room for a long time after Xenia vanished, a thin smile on his face.

Chapter Four: The Hero and the Knight

I

The Commander's Station at the Emaleid Citadel, in the Kingdom of Fernest

Osmund arrived at the Emaleid Citadel ahead of the Independent Cavalry Regiment. He summoned his officers to a council. The Imperial Army had been spotted on the Amalheim Plains to the north of Emaleid.

"Don't you think we should shore up our forces and wait for the Independent Cavalry Regiment to arrive, my lord?" Major Celim started off the debate with a conservative proposal.

"I agree with the major."

"As do I." Voices of assent echoed from around the table.

"You're saying we should bring the war down on Emaleid?" Osmund demanded, looking between the three who had spoken first.

It was Celim who replied, speaking for the group. "I see your point, ser, but I must beg to differ. Emaleid has strong walls. I very much doubt any damage will reach the city proper." Nigh impenetrable walls protected the citadel, and a deep moat encircled that to boot. Once the drawbridge was raised, the enemy would be prevented from even reaching the citadel gates. If they did as Celim suggested—shored up their defenses and waited for the battle—things would probably play out in their favor. In that scenario, however, they would all but certainly lose the opportunity to decisively drive off the enemy.

"You're too optimistic, Celim. Nothing's been confirmed, but for all we know, the enemy could have siege weaponry," said Osmund.

"But surely, my lord, it is equally possible that they do not."

"Yes, of course," he replied, "But in war, one always has to assume the worst will happen. We should only engage the enemy with our backs against the citadel walls as a last resort." His tone was brusque, to remind the doubtful

officers of their lack of real battlefield experience. This wasn't a military fort. If the enemy breached the gates or the walls, they would descend upon the citizens in their homes, the result of which would be as devastating as an avalanche. They would slaughter the men and make sport of the women. Osmund could already hear the roars and the screams and see the hellish ruins of the city, engulfed in malice. At that point, it would be too late to wish they'd done things differently.

"My lord has heard the reports, I believe?" Celim asked. "The enemy force is all clad in red plate. You must know what that means..."

Red plate—the hallmark of the Crimson Knights. All the officers present knew it was the appearance of those same Crimson Knights that had turned the tide against the Third and Fourth Legions and brought about their destruction. The Crimson Knights were notorious throughout Duvedirica, almost to the same degree as the fearsome Azure Knights. It was because of them that Celim and the other officers advocated a conservative approach—why they were afraid. Osmund, for his part, willingly acknowledged that the Crimson Knights were a threat to be taken seriously. All it meant was that if they could find a way to crush the enemy, the glory would be that much greater.

There's never been a safe way to wage a war, thought Osmund. If our enemy is dangerous, well, that means we have all the more to gain. A vision of a rank insignia with two shining golden stars blazed in his mind's eye.

"You've all made yourselves understood. But as I said, fighting up against the city is a last resort. We will strike the first blow. Our intelligence says the enemy has around three thousand soldiers, which, in a funny coincidence, is just as many as we do."

"That we are evenly matched is precisely why this is so risky, my lord! I beg you to reconsider!" Celim burst out, sending spittle flying. The other officers added their protests to his.

"Now listen here!" cut in Osmund. "Celim, and the rest of you too. The matter is decided. You have your orders." Celim's mouth clamped shut, and, grudgingly, he nodded. The other officers copied him in silence. Osmund felt their dissatisfaction, but he'd made himself clear. There could be no more

dissent. That was how it went in the army.

“With that out of the way,” he continued, “Tell me about our enemy’s movements.”

“The scouts report that their force has stopped at the Amalheim Plains,” said Celim. “We don’t know why they’ve stopped, and they show no sign of continuing their advance.”

“I see. That *is* odd...” Osmund mused. “All right. Let’s keep an eye on the situation while the soldiers make ready to move out. Ensure the scouts report every detail of what they see. That will be all.” He noted the hard expressions Celim and the others wore as they saluted, rising and turning to leave the command station.

The Imperial Army on the Amalheim Plains

“They’re staying put, Lieutenant Colonel,” drawled Captain Lamia. As his aide spoke, Vollmer rose laboriously from the wine barrel he used in place of a chair. He was a huge man, so vast that the battle-axe strapped to his back looked like a woodcutter’s hatchet. His steel-like muscles showed quite obviously even through his armor, and he had long, straggly hair and an unkempt beard not unlike the mane of a wild beast. He carried himself with the unmistakable air of a powerful and battle-hardened warrior.

“What a dull lot. Are they serious about taking back the north or not?” he grumbled, then called out to his soldiers, “Hey, someone go bang on the gates to the citadel and bring me that damn monster! There’s five pieces of gold here for anyone who can pull it off!” At the mention of five pieces of gold, some of the soldiers stirred. That was enough to live off for two years without doing a day of work. Lamia huffed in exasperation.

“And how are you going to make the monster come along with you?” he said, spreading his arms. “It’s not like we have a collar lying around. You must stop putting foolish ideas into the heads of our sweet young soldiers, ser.”

Those around him all guffawed with laughter. Vollmer imagined the monster girl who’d left thousands of their soldiers trembling wrecks and how he couldn’t wait to split her skull open with his prized battle-axe. His desire was simple—he

wanted to know how the monster would sing.

“All right, enough messing around. For now, we know the Seventh Legion reached the citadel, correct?” he asked. Lamia inclined his head deferentially, returning his spyglass to his waist.

“Yes, ser. There’s no doubt about that. We’ve had a few reports of a force flying the banners of the Seventh Legion passing through the gates, which matches with the information the shimmer sent us.”

“Good. I can’t go disgracing her name by returning without a present for Lady Rosenmarie, not after she was kind enough to assign this mission to me.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, ser,” replied Lamia, a teasing note in his voice. “Against such an exceptional warrior as yourself, I expect even this so-called monster will flee with her tail between her legs. They don’t call you The Man-Butcher for nothing.”

Vollmer heaved a great sigh. “Would you drop it with the name?” he said. “Who the hell even came up with that rubbish? Everyone thinks I’m some murder-loving maniac now.”

According to Lamia, the name had stuck thanks to his tendency to leave his opponents mutilated beyond recognition. He didn’t kill them like that because he enjoyed it, of course—he had just been born freakishly strong. The moniker of “Man-Butcher” was a constant, maddening source of annoyance for him.

“Ser?!” gasped Lamia, blinking at him in astonishment. “What are you talking about? You love killing! Are you feeling all right?” Vollmer looked around at the other soldiers, but they all avoided his eyes. He got the feeling there were some serious misunderstandings going on here.

“Okay, let’s get one thing straight. You’ve got me all wrong. What I love is the song they sing when they meet my axe. Whether they die or not after that is neither here nor there.”

“Ser,” said Lamia, with deliberate patience, “that’s more or less the same thing as saying you love killing.”

Vollmer exhaled heavily, wondering why he always had to be surrounded by people who couldn’t understand art. “Try to appreciate art the way I do, Lamia.

Your mind will be richer for it,” he said, holding his hand reverentially to his breast.

“It’s a little hard to take that seriously coming from a man the size of a grizzly bear, ser,” said Lamia. “Anyway, what’s our plan? If our opponent won’t come to us, should we get out the siege weapons and put an end to this quickly? It’s a prime opportunity to test the new model’s effectiveness.”

Vollmer followed Lamia’s gaze to the scrubby forest, where wheels were just visible from between the trees. The Imperial Weapons Development Unit’s prototype miniature catapult. Twice as powerful as previous models, it could reduce a wooden barricade to rubble in a single strike. “Only as a last resort,” said Vollmer. “Colonel Guyel intends to make the citadel our base of operations for the advance into central Fernest. We want to take it with as little damage as possible.”

“Then what is the plan, ser?” Lamia asked again. “We’re not just going to sit here idling away the days, I hope?”

Vollmer rested his chin on his fist and thought. Lamia was right—staying put would do them no good. Soon, he would have to decide on a definite course of action. “No, that won’t do... All right, how about we send them an *invitation*?” he said. Lamia immediately brightened.

“That sounds perfect, ser. Our friends in the Seventh Legion will be overjoyed to receive an invitation from you, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Shall I leave the details to you then, Lamia?” Vollmer said.

Lamia gave an enthusiastic nod, and said, “I’ll have the trees felled, and the necessary *materials* procured.” He called over several of the soldiers standing by, then left, humming quietly.

The sun rose over Mount Gransaless the next morning, its soft light gradually spilling across the plains below. The light of dawn *also* shone upon three bodies impaled on stakes—one was missing their eyes, mouth, and nose, the next had clean stumps where their limbs had been, and the third had been flayed from head to toe. At their feet, neatly folded, were three sets of military uniforms in the colors of the royal army.

It was the morning after Olivia's scuffle with the shimmers when Olivia and the Independent Cavalry Regiment left the desert town of Sephim. After what they had learned from the shimmer Arvin, they didn't need to stay there any longer. The guard captain had slumped in disappointment at the news, but perked up again when informed that the chances of an imperial attack were slim to none, and came to send them off with a beaming smile, utterly transparent as usual.

Two days later, and with no further trouble, the Independent Cavalry Regiment drew close to the Emaleid Citadel. They moved much more quickly now that they were no longer trying to gather intelligence on the enemy. Lulled by the swaying motion of the black horse, Olivia dozed off from time to time, her head pitching forward.

"Major, it's dangerous to fall asleep on the back of a galloping horse," Claudia called out to her, looking worried. Olivia laced her fingers together and stretched her arms out, then looked up at the sky with a huge yawn.

"It's just such a nice day... I bet it'd feel amazing to fall asleep in the grass here," she said. "Hey, why don't we take a break?"

"It's barely two hours since the last time we stopped for you to take a break," sighed Claudia. "We're almost at the Emaleid Citadel, so you'll have to hold on 'til we get there." Riding along beside her, Ashton smiled apologetically, and Olivia had no choice but to accept defeat on her let's-nap-in-the-grass strategy.

"You're such a meanie, Claudia!" she moaned. "Hey, Ashton, does the Emaleid Citadel have good food? It must, right?"

"I don't know why you're asking me. But I guess it's a castle town, so there's probably some decent fare."

"I'm not doing this to be mean, Major," Claudia cut in. "The thing is—"

"Be quiet a minute." Olivia held a finger to her lips to tell the others to stop talking, then looked ahead of them. She felt something coming their way.

"What is it?" Claudia asked, her voice tense.

Ashton quickly reached for his spyglass. "There's a lone rider heading towards us!" he shouted.

Claudia immediately called out, "All forces, halt!" All eyes were fixed ahead, from whence the clatter of hoofbeats was soon followed by the figure of a man in armor.

"Isn't that...a royal army soldier?"

"Looks like it," said Olivia.

"He's riding hard. I wonder if something happened at the citadel," said Claudia. As the man drew closer to Olivia and the others, a look of relief came over his face, but he quickly composed himself and rode up to them.

"Ser, I apologize for coming to you on horseback, but I'm afraid it's an emergency. Am I correct in assuming I speak to Commander Olivia of the Independent Cavalry Regiment?"

"That's me. Who are you?"

"Yes, ser. My name is Private Reese, and I serve under Major General Osmund. Our forces are right now engaged with the Crimson Knights on the Amalheim Plains. They have us in a bad position, ser... I've come... I've come to beg for your aid!" Reese cried. He shook as he spoke, and no sooner were the words out his mouth he toppled from his horse, the last of his strength spent. Ashton swiftly dismounted and hurried over to the man, propping him up.

"He's only fainted," he said. Claudia let a breath out, then frowned.

"I didn't think we'd find Osmund's regiment already in the thick of battle. And against the Crimson Knights! They're a formidable enemy."

"In that case, unless we get there quick, they'll all die, right?" asked Olivia. Claudia nodded firmly.

"That's right, Major. We cannot abandon our allies."

"Best get a move on, then," said Olivia. Claudia was on the verge of giving the order to move out, when Ashton's panicked voice rang out from behind them.

"Wait, just wait!" He was staring at her, his eyes bulging.

“A-Ashton?” Olivia asked. She shivered a little at the frightful look in his eyes. He never usually looked like that.

“Second Lieutenant Claudia is right—the Crimson Knights are not to be trifled with,” he said. “They’ll overwhelm the new recruits. We need a plan—a way to keep them alive.”

Olivia met Ashton’s piercing gaze, trying to think. The Crimson Knights were powerful; she knew that much from what the other two had told her. She glanced at a few of the new recruits and found them pale and trembling. They truly didn’t look like they’d last long in battle unless they came up with some sort of strategy.

“Do you have any ideas, Ashton?”

“I’m sorry. I know I brought this up, but... I can’t think of anything,” Ashton said, hanging his head in shame. Olivia looked over at Claudia, but the other girl only shook her head silently. So neither of them had any ideas.

Hmmm, what to do... thought Olivia. *If only I were alone, I could work something out... Huh? Alone...? That’s it! Alone!* She snapped her fingers. Ashton and Claudia looked at each other.

“You have a plan?” asked Ashton.

“Hurry up and tell us, Major,” Claudia said at the same time.

Olivia, a little taken aback to be pressed by both of them at once, inadvertently took a step back. “Uh, um. So, ideally, we’d have three soldiers for every Crimson Knight, right? One attacks, one defends, and the third supports the other two. We get the new recruits to fight like that, in teams of three. That way their odds of surviving should go right up.”

“Teams of three... So each soldier only needs to focus on one role. You’re right, I think even the recruits could fight that way,” Ashton said. He nodded, looking impressed, but Claudia’s brow creased.

“What’s up, Claudia?” asked Olivia. “You don’t think it’ll work? I thought it was a pretty good idea...”

“Oh, no... No, it’s not that. I only...” She struggled to explain. “When I think of

my honor as a knight, the idea of fighting three-on-one...”

“Claudia, this is war. Plus, the new recruits aren’t knights, are they?”

“I know that, ser,” snapped Claudia. “I just... Agh!” She groaned with frustration and ran her fingers through her hair. Her eyes were bloodshot. Without thinking, Olivia backed away, deciding that right now Claudia was too scary to talk to and it was better to just keep an eye on her.

“Let’s do it.”

Claudia’s shoulders rose and fell with the effort of croaking the words out. Whatever internal battle she’d been fighting was over. *Claudia is funny sometimes*, thought Olivia.

Osmund cursed his own poor judgment. His wish to protect the residents of the citadel from the battle had been genuine, but the fact was he had been blinded by his lust for glory. That, and nothing else, was what had brought this mess down on their heads.

So this is the punishment I get for my greed... he thought, chuckling to himself. Before him, a giant of a man swung a huge battle-axe like it weighed nothing. The brave soldiers who stood against him were sent flying like scraps of paper. Sprays of blood and chunks of flesh rained down around Osmund. *How fragile the bodies of humans are*, he thought stupidly as he watched. Celim had been right. They should have waited for the Independent Cavalry Regiment.

Celim himself was no more. He had departed this world protecting Osmund, who expected to follow his aide shortly.

But I just couldn’t do it... he thought. *I couldn’t leave such wanton cruelty unpunished!* When he’d seen the mangled bodies of his scouts, his vision had gone red. Before Celim could stop him, he was already ordering their forces to march on the Amalheim Plains.

It hadn’t occurred to him that it was a trap.

When they reached the plains, Osmund and his soldiers had charged deep into the enemy ranks and, in the blink of an eye, the Crimson Knights who had lain hidden nearby moved in to surround them. Osmund ordered his soldiers to

go on the defensive immediately, but his orders were lost in the chaos. His soldiers, helpless to resist, were overrun. With their only path to retreat cut off, they couldn't even fall back and regroup.

"Is that it?" the giant said, resting his battle-axe on his shoulder. He sounded bored. "This is the Seventh Legion they say defeated the Southern Area Army? These pathetic weaklings? The monster girl didn't even show up." Osmund, hearing "monster girl," realized that the man's target must be Olivia.

"Ah, sorry about that," he said. "Your monster girl is in a different regiment. You'll have to settle for me instead."

The giant grunted in annoyance and muttered, "Dammit, Lamia, get your facts straight. Feeding me total misinformation..." He paused before he continued. "Well, I suppose the part about the Seventh Legion was true, at least." The whole time, he spoke as though Osmund wasn't there.

"Hey!" Osmund called out. "A major general isn't good enough for you?"

"Huh?" The giant looked at him. "I mean, it's a disappointment, no mistake, but it'll have to do. Can't go home without a present for Lady Rosenmarie."

"A present?" Osmund echoed. The giant only smiled thinly and drew two fingers across his throat.

"Major General, right? You'd better have a pretty song for me, then."

In an instant, his smile changed to reveal the pointed teeth of a wild beast as he swung his axe down at Osmund's head. Osmund flung his sword up to parry the strike, but the terrifying force was too much for him. He twisted his body to try and divert the axe's force, but the giant shifted his stance to match him. Osmund realized the giant was not only strong like he'd supposed, but clever to boot. His sword was knocked back towards him and he felt the blade of the axe begin to dig into his shoulder. He screamed in pain.

"Yes! Sing!" cried the giant. "Don't worry, Major General. I'll be sure to show you the respect you deserve by taking my time. Now sing for me!" He roared with laughter, then drove his axe in deeper. Blood gushed from Osmund's shoulder and his vision grew dull. It was as though his strength was being sucked away into the ground itself. He sank to one knee.

This is it, then, he thought. He had just surrendered himself to death when there was a sudden gust of wind, and the giant was thrown away from him. In the shock of that moment, Osmund forgot his pain.

From behind him, a voice clear as a bell said, “Not a moment too soon, huh?” Osmund knew that voice from somewhere. He turned slowly towards it, and saw a girl with an innocent smile on her face. It was Olivia.

III

“M-Major Olivia...?!”

“Spread out in a circular formation across this area. Don’t let the enemy get close,” Olivia barked her orders to her soldiers.

“Yes, ser!” they replied with gusto. Olivia nodded, then turned back to Osmund.

“That was a close one!” she said, then corrected herself. “Um, I mean, thank goodness you’re safe, ser!” She saluted Osmund. *Military formality really is a total pain*, she thought. He stared back at her, his eyes wide as he tried to stem the blood flowing freely from his shoulder. Then he smiled shakily.

“Hey, this is a battlefield. No time to stand around saluting.”

“Huh?” Olivia said, then caught herself again. “I mean, um, there isn’t, ser? Colonel Otto said I always have to salute when I meet a senior officer.” She casually knocked aside an incoming arrow. Osmund was confusing her. There was no way *Otto* had taught her the wrong thing. He was basically a walking volume of the military disciplinary code.

“Well...” croaked Osmund, “That really depends on the situation. You definitely don’t need to salute in the middle of a battle, though. Hell, I heard you were an odd one, but—” He trailed off with a grunt, his face twisting in pain. Osmund and Otto... Who was right? Olivia desperately wanted to know the answer. She resolved to ask Otto the next time she saw him.

“Major General Osmund, I think you should fall back,” Olivia said. “Claudia and the others have secured you a path to retreat, so you can leave the rest to

me.” She called over two nearby soldiers, and ordered them to help Osmund stand up. If he died on her now, skipping lunch to rush over here would’ve all been for nothing.

“I’m sorry...” was all Osmund said, then the two soldiers hauled him away. Olivia watched them go. Then, there was an earth-shattering bellow from behind her.

“Done talking yet?”

Olivia turned, and saw the giant man she’d kicked off Osmund before. He smiled at her with a bestial grin and flexed his neck, making the joints pop. His hands rested on an enormous battle-axe.

“Yep, all done!” said Olivia, then giggled. “Sorry for sending you flying like that,” she added. The giant raised a hand, brushing her off.

“That? Don’t mention it. Such an artistic surprise attack! It’s been a long time since anyone made me taste dirt. I did want to hear how the major general’s song ended, but now that *you’re* here at last, I don’t mind at all!”

“Me?” said Olivia, tilting her head. “But, um, I don’t know you.” She had no recollection of this huge man who looked like a grizzly bear. He was so much bigger than her it was like being a toddler looking up at an adult.

The man guffawed, then said, “Oh, but *I* know *you* very well. The beautiful maiden who has thousands of soldiers petrified with fear. You’re the empire’s biggest celebrity! You ought to keep an eye on your reputation, *little monster*.” He sounded like he was really enjoying himself. Olivia, meanwhile, frowned. She didn’t like how at some point everyone in the empire had started calling her “monster.” The idea that it was going to keep happening made her want to groan with frustration. After Z had given her such a lovely name too.

She huffed in annoyance. “I’m not a monster. My name is *Olivia*.”

“Dear me, how rude of me. Of *course* even monsters have names. My name is Vollmer, by the way. Vollmer Gangrett,” he said, pressing a hand to his chest and lowering his head respectfully. “It’s a pleasure, I’m sure.” The gentlemanly pose was so at odds with his appearance that Olivia was a little taken aback. She thought she’d better respond in kind.

“All right, Vollmer Gangrett. Nice to meet you. My name is Olivia Valedstorm. I do wish we could have more time together.” She finished with a line a noble lady in one of her books had used. Then, she took the hem of her skirt in her hands and curtsied.

The giant laughed again. “Hah! I can’t remember the last time my blood ran this hot! Oh, I bet you’ll sing a beautiful tune for me!” The next instant, the battle-axe met the ebony blade with a ferocious impact that sent sparks flying. Vollmer’s eyes sparkled; he looked like he was having the time of his life as he swung his axe at her with reckless abandon. Olivia, deflecting each incoming blow, wondered what he was so happy about. He’d be dead soon, and then there’d be no more tasty food or sweets.

“Good, good! You’re just as incredible as I hoped! It’s not often I meet someone who can withstand me!” Vollmer shouted. “But can you withstand *this*?!” Sliding his right foot back, he twisted, spinning around and swinging his battle-axe in a great cleaving sweep that sent a shock wave that went right through Olivia’s sword and slammed into her. Unable to keep her footing, she was flung up into the air.

“Wh-Whoa!” she cried, then quickly tucked her legs under her arms so that she somersaulted through the air, reducing the force of the shock as she landed. But something was wrong.

“Huh?” She looked down at her right hand that gripped the hilt of her sword and saw it was trembling slightly. The impact of the shock wave had done some damage, then. The feeling she had almost forgotten now brought back memories of her life with Z.

“What’s this, then!” Vollmer called to her. “I might have held back a bit, but that should have shattered your bones to dust! You’re really something, Olivia.” They were supposed to be enemies, but Vollmer was unreserved in his admiration.

“Ah...” said Olivia, under her breath. “You must have a lot of *odh* to be that strong. You’re the second human I’ve met who does.”

“What’s ‘odd’?” Vollmer asked, looking confused. Olivia felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

The first she had met was always by her side, her faithful ally.

Now the second had come to her as an enemy. This had to be what people meant by “divine providence.” Here she had a perfect opportunity to do something to make Z happy.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “Actually, I think this’ll be our last chance to chat, so let me thank you in advance. I’m really grateful to you, Mr. Vollmer. Z will get a good meal thanks to you.”

“Z? A meal?” echoed Vollmer, looking more and more lost. “I can’t understand a thing coming out of your mouth.” Olivia didn’t reply. She only slowly settled deeper into her stance.

The Crimson Knights had Osmund’s regiment surrounded when the Independent Cavalry Regiment arrived and joined the fray. The Independent Cavalry Regiment forced their way through the knights’ ranks just in time to rescue Osmund’s forces, which were on the brink of collapse. Spreading out into a defensive formation, they created a path for the injured to retreat from the battlefield.

Claudia led the charge, swinging her sword with ferocious power and getting soaked in the blood that spurted from every soldier she cut down.

I hope the major was able to get to Osmund... she thought. Olivia, along with three hundred riders, rode to the general’s rescue. She was sure that with Olivia’s superhuman abilities, they wouldn’t fail. But the Crimson Knights were not a foe to be underestimated.

“Lieutenant! The enemy is coming from behind to try and surround us!” shouted the one-eyed soldier Gauss, cutting through Claudia’s thoughts. She looked back, and saw a company of mounted soldiers who had penetrated the defensive formation and were galloping towards them.

One on one, their soldiers are still a cut above ours...

If she allowed them to advance unchecked, her force could end up caught in a vise grip between enemy armies on both sides. They had the advantage of numbers if she included Osmund’s soldiers, but the Crimson Knights’ execution

of their maneuvers was flawless. She had to hand it to them—they lived up to their reputation.

“Gauss, take the Second Company and do whatever it takes to stop their advance!”

“I’m on it, ser!” he replied, then turned to the soldiers and roared, “With me!”

“Yes, ser!” came the voices of around five hundred soldiers. They rode out, gathering force like a tidal wave. Claudia, too, kicked her horse forward, advancing towards the enemy’s main force. Her advance was cut off almost at once, however, and in an instant the battlefield devolved into an all-out melee. She saw a man with his eyeballs hanging out of their sockets, his helmet smashed in, and a woman, perhaps thrown from her horse, her neck bent at a sickening angle. All across the battlefield, the fighting churned out a constant stream of corpses.

She heard a voice, and turned to see a man on a chestnut horse in an imperial officer’s uniform.

“Tell me something!” he said. “I heard your commander is a little girl. Is that true?”

“And what if they are?” Claudia retorted. His sword came swinging down and she raised her own to meet it.

“Those reflexes! Looks like I was right,” the man said. “Shame, I guess this will be over before the colonel gets to you.”

They stopped their horses, pushing against each other with their blades. Claudia, seeing they were too evenly matched, aimed a kick at the man’s horse, just as the man did the same thing. Both horses began to buck and neigh, throwing their riders to the ground. Claudia leapt up, reasserting her stance just as the man brought his sword sweeping across the ground. She jumped out of the way with a grunt, then kicked him in the face. He staggered back, his face screwed up in pain. He wiped away the blood dripping from his nose with his thumb.

“Not bad at all,” he said, with a savage laugh.

Oh? She's planning something... Vollmer thought as he watched Olivia deepen her stance. He tightened his grip on his battle-axe, not letting his attention wander for a moment. The girl had the strength to weather his blows, yet she moved like an acrobat. He knew without a doubt that she was the most powerful opponent he had ever faced. Rosenmarie had been right to send him. He watched as Olivia continued to mutter nonsense to herself. He had the feeling she was just getting started. He couldn't underestimate her.

Ordinary soldiers don't stand a chance, that's for sure. But I should be able to handle her, he thought. It was the nature of rumors that they got exaggerated. Vollmer felt confident that however Olivia decided to come at him, he could twist out of the way. That confidence was shown to be false a moment later, however, when with a soft tap, Olivia materialized directly in front of him. Vollmer was shocked, but he reacted as only one who had come through as many bloody battles as he had could. It was his survival instinct. Before he himself realized what was happening, he parried the ebony blade as it swung towards his throat. A second later, and it would have been a tragic farewell to his head and his body.

A contest of strength began between Vollmer and Olivia. Vollmer gritted his teeth so hard he thought they might shatter, roaring with effort as he pushed his axe back towards Olivia. He wasn't testing her anymore; he was fighting with every ounce of power he had. Any other opponent would have been a smear on the ground by now. Olivia's slender frame, however, showed as little sign of moving as a boulder. Not only that, but a cruel smile played around the corners of her mouth. A droplet of cold sweat trickled down Vollmer's forehead.

Could it be... he thought, *Have I at last crossed a line I shouldn't have...?* He felt anxiety, frustration, and, finally, fear. That long-forgotten emotion welled up within his heart, and little by little it began to consume him. For as long as he could remember, Vollmer had been huge and strong. He had never known defeat until Rosenmarie had shown it to him. As a result, once the seeds of fear took root in his heart, it was almost impossible for him to get them out. One had to know fear in order to tame it, and unfortunately for Vollmer, he had little experience with it—those who could inspire fear in him were few and far

between.

He looked past his axe at Olivia. Although she was tall for a woman, she still barely came up to his waist. Yet right now, she seemed to tower over him.

“Okay, it’s my turn now,” she said. Vollmer recoiled as her words cut into him like the scythe of death itself. He began to swing his axe wildly. Olivia brushed aside every blow with seeming indifference, before finally switching to the offensive and swinging her sword up around his axe. This time it was Vollmer who was sent flying through the air.

She threw me off?! With my size?! Impossible! Vollmer thought, desperately trying and failing to work out how that had really happened. The last tiny part of him that could think logically told him he must not go crashing into the ground like this. He readied himself to break his fall. This was where all that training came in—

“Right arm first.”

Vollmer screamed in pain as his right arm fell away, severed by Olivia, who was suddenly right in front of him. He could no longer muster the strength to control his fall, and his back slammed directly into the ground. He gasped as all the air in his lungs was knocked out of him. The only reason he was still conscious was, ironically, thanks to the agonizing pain in his right arm. He took shallow breaths, trying to catch his breath. Supporting himself with his axe, he managed to get back on his feet. His body had always felt light as a feather to him, but now it could have been made from lead.

Damn her! Where’s she gone?! He cursed silently, looking around for Olivia. The voice that came from behind him was like claws digging into his heart.

“Now the left.” The moment he looked round, his left arm went spinning away through the air, still clutching the axe. Vollmer screamed again. The pool of scarlet blood grew wider around them as Olivia chanted, “Right leg,” then, “left leg,” like a curse.

Vollmer’s brain was utterly paralyzed by pain. He couldn’t think. Partway through, he stopped even caring about what was happening to his body. He blinked, and realized he was looking up into an azure blue sky.

Ah, that is pure beauty, he thought.

“How was that?” asked Olivia. “I saw how you’d cut the limbs off of the royal soldiers on the way here, so I thought I’d do the same. Do you like it?” She stood over him, blocking out the sky. Her hair, like silver thread, spilled down from her shoulders and tickled his nose. He tried to speak, but no sound came out. “Ah, can’t you hear me anymore?” she said. “I knew it was a good idea to thank you in advance. Be a good meal for Z, now.”

He should never have laid a hand on her—never gone anywhere near her. She really was a monster.

Olivia slowly raised her black sword. Black mist coiled around the blade. Vollmer watched through lidded eyes, silently cursing his own foolishness as—

“Commander Olivia has slain the enemy commander!” A roar of celebration went up from the Independent Cavalry Regiment. Meanwhile, every face amongst the Crimson Knights wore an expression of wide-eyed shock. Surely, they all thought, no one could kill Vollmer.

Olivia exhaled softly then looked up at the sky. A murder of gray crows circled up above.

“I wonder if Z got my present...” she wondered aloud.

Lamia’s strike came straight down, but partway through changed trajectory abruptly to sweep sideways. He saw a flicker of surprise in the woman’s eyes, but she sprang back out of range. The cunning tricks Lamia used made him a formidable swordsman, but he’d barely left a scratch on her armor.

“Not bad at all!” he called to her. “Hey, it’s not too late to join the empire’s side if you want. I’d hate to see that talent go to waste. I’ll put in a good word for you and everything.” Lamia made the offer in earnest, but the woman’s frown deepened.

“You must think very little of me,” she spat back. “Don’t make me laugh. Did you really think I’d fall for such a ploy?”

“Oh, come on. I’m offering all this out of the goodness of my heart!” said Lamia, holding his hands out in mock offense. “We all know Fernest is done for. Or do you *want* to be around when everything burns?”

The woman shrugged. “I have my honor as a knight of Fernest,” she replied, with a snort of laughter. “I’m not such a lowlife that I’d jump ship the moment things go bad.”

“So nothing will convince you to change your mind?” he asked one last time.

“Enough. You might call yourself a knight, but you’re nothing of the sort,” said the woman. She held her sword in both hands, pointing directly towards him. *And for that, she seemed to say, I will kill you.*

“Such pretty words,” laughed Lamia. “In that case, time for you to die!” He kicked off and dived straight at her, stabbing rapidly at her from all directions. The woman, however, saw through every strike, hardly seeming to move as she dodged each one. She didn’t just have good reflexes, but also superb dynamic vision. The only thing Lamia managed to cut were a few strands of her hair—none of his other strikes landed. He wondered if he was imagining the faint glow in her eyes. That wasn’t important right now, though. He was getting nowhere like this. He stepped forward on his left foot and tried the same technique as before, swinging his sword down then abruptly changing to the horizontal.

“You tried that already!” the woman shouted. “Don’t think it’ll work twice!” She crouched down close to the ground and moved to sweep his legs out from under him. Meanwhile, Lamia stabbed empty air, his reflexes kicking in a second too late. His attempt to dodge was a step too slow, and he fell heavily to the ground. Without missing a beat, the woman brought the tip of her sword up to his throat.

“You gave me a good fight,” the woman said, her voice hoarse. She would probably kill him soon as blinking if he tried anything. Lamia exhaled deeply through his nose.



“Looks like I lost...” he said. “Come on, kill me then. It won’t be long until you follow me.”

“What, upset you lost?” said the woman, looking disgusted. “You really have fallen far.”

“Oh no, you’re quite wrong there,” Lamia scoffed. “You’re going to die. After the colonel’s done with the monster, he’s coming for you!” He made his tone deliberately taunting. In reality, he hadn’t lost hope, nor did he want to die. This was all just a performance. He would make her angry, distract her, and then get the upper hand back. Contrary to Lamia’s expectations, however, the woman kept her sword pointed steadily at his throat. She sighed softly, then looked at him coldly.

“You’ve made two key mistakes in your reasoning there,” she said, ignoring his threats.

“I—what? Mistakes?”

“First,” she began, “this colonel you’ve pinned your hopes on is already on his way to the land of the dead. I trust at least after joining him there, you will do your duty as a knight.”

The woman spoke with the conviction of someone who had seen Vollmer’s death with her own eyes, Lamia thought, confused. She continued, “Secondly, the major is not a monster. The major—*Olivia*—is a hero!!!” Her voice rose to a shout as she drove her sword deep into Lamia’s neck and out the other side.

IV

At the conclusion of his duel with Olivia, Vollmer Gangrett’s massive form sank to the ground and moved no more.

As the Crimson Knights began to retreat, the royal army thundered after them in pursuit. The soldiers of Osmund’s regiment rode alongside the Independent Cavalry Regiment, rage burning in their eyes.

Captain Gordeau Kreis oversaw the retreat. He was fifty-five years old, but his body was still hale and hearty, and age had done nothing to diminish his spirit.

Already six out of every ten of his soldiers lay dead, but he was determined to give those who remained whatever time he could to flee.

“Not long now! Hold out!” he cried.

“Yes, ser!” his soldiers called back, their vigor restored by his words. Commander Vollmer and his second-in-command Lamia might be dead, but the Knights’ will to fight on was as strong as ever. Rosenmarie commanded the absolute loyalty of every one of her Knights, and their honor would never permit them to bend the knee to their enemy. This, however, would not help them to get away. Gordeau, if he was honest with himself, knew that they had next to no hope of a successful retreat. The reason was right in front of him, plain as day.

“Captain Gordeau!” called his advisor, Heinrich, galloping up from behind him. “They broke Lieutenant Burkhart’s defensive formation!” Gordeau looked up at the young girl on a black horse, her hair billowing out behind her.

“The monster caught up to us already?” he said. The story had already spread of how the monster in human skin killed Vollmer the Man-Butcher only after slicing off all his limbs. It was a clear answer to the “invitation” Lamia had sent the Seventh Legion. They had laughed at the tales of thousands of soldiers terrified by one little girl, but now they all tasted that fear themselves. Gordeau immediately sprang into action, issuing orders to his full force. “Get the wounded out first!” he called. “Form up in a circle with pikes at the front! Don’t let the enemy break through! I want three ranks of archers in the back firing volleys! Not one soldier gets past us!”

“Yes, ser!” they answered.

Watching this, Claudia turned to Olivia and said, “Major, the enemy is shifting to a circle formation. It appears they plan to keep resisting to the last.”

“Trust the Crimson Knights...” Olivia said, with an impressed nod. “They’re holding out well. If we try to break through, our losses are going to really pile up. I’ll go in first and upset their formation. Can I leave you two to judge the right moment to attack?”

“Yes, ser!” barked Claudia. Ashton blew a high blast on his trumpet to signal

to the rest of the force.

“Crescent formation!” he shouted. He then turned to Olivia, concern in his eyes. “Olivia, I know as well as anyone just how strong you are, but don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“I know,” she said with a smile. “Thanks for worrying, though. See you in a bit!” She waved, then pulled out ahead of the force.

“Let’s go, horsey,” she murmured, stroking the neck of the black horse. Sensing its master’s will, it gathered speed. Z always told her that horses were highly intelligent animals, but Olivia thought her black horse was especially clever. She decided after this battle was over, she’d think of a nice name for it.

“Pikes forward!” shouted a man from the enemy’s ranks. With practiced efficiency, they moved to form a solid wall of spearpoints that screamed “this far but no further.” Olivia took the mini ballista from her back and aimed it at the man’s forehead. Then she pulled the trigger.

The metal spring twanged, and the bolt passed clean through the man’s skull. Olivia immediately loaded another bolt, then pulled the trigger. With each shot, another pikeman crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut.

This is so handy! Olivia thought. *So much more powerful than a bow, and with a bit of practice I can get out consecutive shots. It was definitely the right move accepting it from Brum back at Fort Caspar.* She stowed the mini ballista on her back again and drew the ebony blade. The black horse galloped faster still, and in an instant, she plunged deep into the enemy ranks.

“The monster’s gone crazy!” yelled a man, probably their captain. “We’ve got her surrounded! Impale her!” Olivia cut off the heads of the pikes that jabbed towards her, then struck back, severing the heads of her attackers and sending them flying. Blood rained down on them all, staining the Crimson Knights’ armor an even brighter red.

A soldier stabbed at Olivia from the side, trying to get past her guard. Her blade cut right through his helmet and into his skull, and brain matter oozed out like the juice of an overripe fruit. She then spun the black horse and began to attack in earnest, her sword flashing in all directions. One by one, the faces of the Crimson Knights twisted in horror, and they began to retreat. Their

formation was breaking down.

“Lieutenant Claudia, a section of the enemy formation has collapsed!” Ashton called out. Claudia took a deep breath.

“This is it!” she bellowed. “Smash them to pieces!”

“Yes, ser!”

The Independent Cavalry Regiment, with Osmund’s soldiers alongside them, began their charge. Facing enemies within and without, the fearsome Crimson Knights faltered, unsure whether to flee. Another fell, and then another, their lifeblood pooling crimson on the battlefield.

“C-Captain!” a soldier wailed, their face a mask of terror. “We can’t keep this up!” Their ranks were rapidly crumbling, and soon the enemy would have them surrounded. There was no hope of repairing the formation now.

Gordeau looked forward and saw the monster in human skin approaching with terrifying speed. Her blade was a black blur, bringing down another of the all-powerful Crimson Knights with every swing. They were helpless before her. He felt like he was watching a bad theater performance. That black sword, wrapped in dark mist and dripping with blood, seemed like something out of a fantasy world.

“Captain Gordeau, we can’t hold them...” Heinrich groaned.

“How many wounded remain?”

“There’s...” Heinrich replied haltingly. “We’ve only got half of them out.”

“Only half...” Gordeau was silent for a moment, then said “Go support those bearing the wounded. Then, when you judge it right, take your soldiers and flee.”

“Captain? What about you?” Heinrich replied, horrified. Gordeau didn’t answer. He turned back to the monster and spurred his horse forward. As he sped towards her, he reached into his shirt and pulled out a pendant in the shape of the Goddess Strecia. He wrapped it around his left wrist and said a silent prayer.

Please, Goddess, lend this old man your protection. The monster had toyed

with Vollmer the Man-Butcher like a cat with a mouse. Gordeau knew he had no chance in hell of emerging victorious. Even an old man like him, however, could buy some time for his soldiers to flee. Right now, even one more moment was of immeasurable value.

“No further, monster! You have to go through me, Gordeau Kreis of the Crimson Knights!”

“Oh, not again,” Olivia said, groaning. “I’m not a monster. My name is Olivia.” She pointed her sword at him and charged. He waited until she was just alongside him, then stabbed his trident at her heart. Even a monster had to die if you stabbed it through the heart.

“No!” he shouted. His attack got nowhere near Olivia. He threw aside the remains of his trident, cut cleanly in half, and drew his sword, turning his horse to confront Olivia.

“Can we wrap this up?” she asked.

“Wrap what up?” he repeated, confused. Olivia tilted her head at him, then her eyes widened, and she laughed.

“Oh, sorry! That’s me using the wrong words again,” she explained. “What I mean to say is, I’m going to kill you now.”

“Ah,” replied Gordeau. “I see.” So the monster wasn’t comfortable with human language, Gordeau observed, gripping the hilt of his sword tighter. He let out a quiet breath, then spurred his horse to a gallop, heading straight at Olivia.

“Diiiiiie!” he shrieked, summoning more strength than he’d known he possessed into a sidelong sweep that Olivia parried easily with her black blade. His sword caught, then was sent flying away into the sky. Without thinking, Gordeau looked up to follow the sword, only for a dark shadow to descend over his vision.

“A-A scythe?!” he cried out in shock. He rubbed his eyes, doing a double and then a triple take as he took in the great, ebony-black scythe before him. There was no sign of the black sword Olivia had held before. The only thing that remained was the disturbing black mist that flowed from it.

Aren't there children's stories where death gods wield scythes like that? Wait... Death gods? His mouth twisted at this chance insight, and he began to laugh uncontrollably. *Oh, now I understand! There was never any hope! Colonel Vollmer died for nothing. What arrogance, to think mere humans could stand against a god!*

That was true even if the god was only one of death.

"It's all come together at last," he said. "You aren't a monster, are you?"

"That's right," she said, pleased. "I'm Olivia Valedstorm. I'm so glad a human from the empire *finally* gets it." She nodded at him, but Gordeau shook his head.

"No, that's not it," he replied. "I see it clearly now. You are a God of Death."

"A god of death?" Olivia said, her eyes going wide. "No, that's Z." She swung the great scythe. Pain like Gordeau had never experienced before coursed through his body like lightning, and his vision went white.

"I wonder if this Gordeau guy knew something about Z," Olivia mused. "Ahhh, I should have taken him prisoner instead of just killing him." Holding her head in her hands, she looked down at the two halves of Gordeau's body at her feet. On the ground beside him, a shattered pendant sparkled.

Interlude: Gile Marion

The Training Hall in the Emaleid Citadel

It was dusk. From a corner of the training hall came the whooshing sound of a blade.

"I thought I'd find you here," came a voice. "Still practicing your sword form?"

"Is that you, Ashton?" replied Gile without looking. "Hope you don't mind if I leave off the formalities, seeing as we're alone." He raised his sword again.

"That's fine by me," Ashton replied. "You're really working hard at this." As he watched Gile continuing to swing his sword, his expression showed neither admiration nor annoyance. At this time of day, Gile was the only one still training. At least, he was the only one in the training hall.

"Of course I am," he said. "I'm not fit to fight alongside Major Olivia like this. As was made painfully obvious when we fought the Crimson Knights..." Gile had been training for over a year now. As he grew stronger, however, it only cast into clearer relief more clearly how unbelievably powerful Olivia was.

I must have sounded like such a fool back then, he thought, remembering how on the way to the Plains of Ilys he had loudly declared to Claudia how strong he'd gotten. She had looked at him with something like pity. Now he understood why. The embarrassment and disgust he felt at that memory made him want to crawl into a hole and never come out.

"You say that, but you've actually improved quite a lot, don't you think?" Ashton said. "Didn't you take down one of the Crimson Knights' platoon leaders?"

Gile was silent for a moment. "Tell me, Ashton," he said. "If you had to be precise, just how big do you think the gap is between me and Major Olivia?"

"Wait, what?"

"Just answer the question."

“I don’t know! You can’t just ask me that all of a sudden,” said Ashton, holding his hands up apologetically.

“Fine, then. Let me tell you,” said Gile. “It’s like I’m an ant, and she’s a unicorn. In other words, we’re not even competing.”

“Is it really that bad?” Ashton said. “I mean, I’ve seen Olivia in action. I get where you’re coming from. But from my perspective you’re both strong—I *wish* I was as strong as you.” He looked thoroughly dejected. Gile couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Seriously?” he asked. “Even now, you want to get stronger?”

“I’m still a man,” Ashton replied. “Every man wants to be strong.” He slowly drew the sword sheathed at his waist, and swung it a few times for Gile. His stance was terrible, and Gile had to stop himself laughing as he watched Ashton get yanked off balance by the weight of the blade. Gile observed him in silence for a while, until Ashton turned jerkily back to him, moving like a rusty hinge.

“Do you think I’m getting better?” he asked.

“Look, Ashton...” Gile began. “There’s other kinds of strength that don’t involve swinging a sword, you know?”

“I-I didn’t ask you to try and make me feel better,” said Ashton, pouting.

“I’m not,” retorted Gile. “Are you seriously telling me you don’t know your own strength?”

“My strength? I’m worse with a sword and spear than our worst soldiers,” he said, with a self-deprecating smile. Gile raised a finger and jabbed it into Ashton’s forehead.

“You’re a real moron sometimes,” he said. “Your strength is *here!*” He jabbed him again. “Here! You’ve got something I can’t have, no matter how much I might want it. All my strength is nothing compared to that!” Gile could die and it probably wouldn’t have any lasting impact on the regiment. The other members of the first platoon might mourn his death, but that was it. If they lost *Ashton*, on the other hand, the brains of the whole operation, that would be devastating. Ashton had once said it was more important to keep one’s allies alive than to kill one’s enemies. Though he only had a few soldiers under his

command, Gile knew firsthand just how hard that was.

Ashton rubbed the red spot on his forehead, muttering, "Yeah, but how can I call myself a man when I can't even defend myself? It's pathetic."

"You're not pathetic, and if it comes to that, I'll protect you. I, for one, don't want to see Major Olivia sad."

"What do you mean, 'sad'?" said Ashton blankly. Gile tapped him on the forehead again.

"Are you that dense? You think she wouldn't be sad?"

"Well, no, I just..." Ashton mumbled, "I mean, I've never seen her sad before. She's always got that carefree smile..."

Gile sighed deeply. "For a clever guy, you are really dumb. Typical, though."

"Well, I'm sorry for my stupidity."

"Ah, well. You'll work it out eventually."

"Like you're so smart," grumbled Ashton, returning his sword to its sheath and looking suspiciously at Gile. "Have *you* worked it out, then, whatever it is?"

"Pretty sure I've got a better idea of what's going on than you, at least." Ashton looked like he was about to say something, but Gile held up a hand to cut him off.

"Major Olivia!" he called out.

"So this is where you've been, Gile. Oh, and Ashton!" Olivia peered through the half-closed door. Gile bounded over to her, swift as an arrow.

"My Lady Valkyrie, it pains me to receive you in such a squalid place!" he cried, dropping to his knees and pressing his hand to his heart. "You need only to call, and I would be at your side in a moment!" From above him, Olivia gave a strained smile. How he loved the rare smiles she bestowed upon him.

"Umm, okay," she said. "I just wanted to ask, are there any vampire birds around here? I'm really craving them."

"A vampire bird? Just a moment," Gile said, pulling a notebook titled *The Valkyrie* from his pocket and flipping through the pages. In the pages of this

book, he had recorded his painstaking investigation of all the foods that Olivia liked. It was a treasure worth more than jewels. He had, of course, questioned all the hunters of Emaleid to ensure all his information was up-to-date and exhaustive.

“Let’s see now...” he said. “It says that vampire birds were sighted on Mount Ebona, to the west of here.” He then opened a new page and noted down, *Likes vampire bird meat*.

“Got it! I really appreciate it, thank you. See you around too, Ashton.” With a wave, Olivia turned to go, but Gile frantically called after her.

“You mean you’re going to go hunting vampire birds now, ser? Alone?”

“Well, yeah, got to strike while the iron’s hot!” Olivia said, turning back with a cheerful smile. “I’ve got good night vision too.”

“May I go with you, my lady? I happen to know the wilderness well. I might be of some small assistance...”

“Oh, that’s right. You used to be a hunter, right?” said Olivia, putting a finger to her cheek and thinking. “You’re good at tracking prey, and those birds you plucked were to die for...” She considered a moment longer, then said, “All right, let’s go!”

“Thank you, ser!” gushed Gile. Olivia nodded, and set off. As Gile followed her, exuberant, Ashton reached out and roughly grabbed his arm. “Oy!” Gile said. “What, you want to come too?”

Ashton, eyes widening in affront, hissed in his ear, “Of course I don’t. Do you know what you’re getting yourself into? She said ‘vampire bird,’ as in, the class two dangerous beast vampire bird! You’re a hunter, you must know that much!”

It was true. Gile knew all of that without needing Ashton to tell him. Hunters spoke of unicorns as the rulers of the land, and vampire birds as rulers of the sky. They had glossy black feathers and four bloodred eyes, two on each side of their heads. Their wingspan was as great as three grown men, and they came corkscrewing down out of the sky to skewer their prey with their strong and cruelly sharp beaks. As their name suggested, they fed on blood.

It was law amongst hunters that if you came across such desiccated corpses, you ran.

“I’m well aware of all that.”

“You know, and yet you’re still going? And you call *me* a moron? I think you’ve got me beat there!” Ashton replied, staring at Gile in disbelief.

“I know the major’s strong, but I can’t let her go alone,” said Gile.

“Then stop her!”

“Okay, let’s say I told her not to go. Do you think she’d stop?” Gile asked.

Ashton was silent for a long moment. “No,” he said at length. “She wouldn’t listen to me either.” There was a pause, then Ashton sighed heavily.

“Exactly,” said Gile. “Maybe Lieutenant Claudia could stop her, but no one else. Besides, I couldn’t bring myself to do it, not when she looks so happy.” He looked over to Olivia, who was humming cheerfully to herself. “Look, don’t worry about it. If I have to, I’ll throw myself in between her and anything that could hurt her.” He patted Ashton on the shoulder, trying to be comforting, but Ashton brushed him off.

Looking worriedly at Gile, he said, “Actually, I was more concerned for you.”

“Me?!”

“If you’re not coming, Gile, I’m leaving you behind!” called Olivia. Gile looked over and saw to his shock that she was already a way ahead of them and puffing out her cheeks.

“Ah, crap. See you round, Ashton!”

“Hold on—” Ashton tried to call him back, but Gile ignored him, sprinting to catch up with Olivia.

The next morning, the breakfast table was piled high with juicy, delicious meat.

Just as the Independent Cavalry Regiment soldiers were eagerly digging in, Gile, without thinking, announced loudly that what they saw before them was

the meat of the vampire bird. Needless to say, every soldier froze mid-mouthful.

Chapter Five: Divide and Conquer

I

The Command Room at Windsome Castle

Colonel Vollmer Gangrett was killed in battle!

As soon as the awful news arrived, Guyel wasted no time in heading to the command room.

“My lady, I have news of the utmost urgency.”

“From that agonized look on your face, I think I can make a pretty good guess as to what it is...” said Rosenmarie. “But go ahead. Make it quick, though.” She glared harder at the piles of paper covering her desk, and Guyel noticed she had faint dark circles under her eyes. She must have stayed up all night. He scowled at the attendant who stood by in a corner of the room. They looked nervously at their feet.

“Stop scowling at my attendant,” said Rosenmarie. “I’m the one pushing to get things done. Now what do you have to tell me?”

“Yes, my lady,” Guyel began. “Colonel Vollmer engaged a force from the Seventh Legion at the Amalheim Plains. He died a hero’s death at the hands of the monster. In addition, twenty-five hundred soldiers were killed—a devastating loss.” He took the report from under his arm and held it out to Rosenmarie. She took it carelessly, skimming the contents before tossing it onto her desk.

“That damn monster. First it drove off the Swarans at Fort Peshitta, now it killed Vollmer. Can you believe it, Guyel? Our Man-Butcher went and got himself butchered,” she snickered.

“My lady!” Guyel protested. “This is hardly a joking matter! The Swarans are of no importance, of course, but Vollmer was not an easy man to beat!”

According to the report, Vollmer’s death had been drawn out and humiliating.

The monster, in an appropriately monstrous fashion, had cut off all four of his limbs before stabbing him through the heart. Guyel didn't have the stomach to joke about it like Rosenmarie. He was sure Vollmer's death would be felt all throughout the Crimson Knights, if not more widely through the imperial army as a whole.

"Don't be so touchy," Rosenmarie said. "We talked about this. I'll just have to kill the monster myself." Her eyes shifted away from Guyel and to the person who accompanied him. "Who's this?"

Beside Guyel, there stood a man dressed all in black—it was Arvin.

"Forgive me for not introducing him sooner, my lady. This is Lieutenant Arvin, a shimmer. He has come bearing a message for you from the monster."

"From the monster? That should be good," said Rosenmarie, beckoning Arvin forward. "Go on, then."

Arvin obliged, taking a step forward. "Yes, ser. This is the message, exactly as it was relayed to me: 'I'm coming to kill you, so you'd better keep your neck squeaky clean until I get there.'"

"Wha—?!" Guyel cried out, shocked beyond words. Arvin had given him no clues as to what the message contained, insisting that it was intended for Rosenmarie.

So that's why he was so adamant. He thought if I knew, I'd stop it before it reached Rosenmarie. As a shimmer, he couldn't let that happen, of course, but that doesn't make me like it any better.

He looked daggers at the man, but Arvin acted like he hadn't noticed. With trepidation, Guyel then turned to look at Rosenmarie. Her whole body was trembling.

"My lady...?" he began.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Rosenmarie cackled, beating her fist on the table. What Guyel had thought was rage was in fact uncontrollable laughter. "Coming to kill me, is she? Better 'keep my neck squeaky clean'? Oh, that's good. I love it!" The attendant gazed at her with terror in their eyes. It was unnerving, Guyel had to agree.

“Lady Rosenmarie,” Arvin said after a moment. “May I offer you one piece of advice?” Despite Rosenmarie’s eccentric behavior, his expression hadn’t shifted at all.

“Don’t get cocky just because you’re a shimmer, Lieutenant,” Guyel barked. “You have disrespected the general.”

The shimmers existed outside the standard chain of command in the imperial army, and so even though Guyel outranked Arvin, he couldn’t give him a direct order. That was also why he hadn’t been able to get him to shed any light on this message from the monster. He could offer little more than a stern talking-to.

Rosenmarie kept chuckling as she spoke. “Oh, whatever. What’s this advice then? I’m listening.” She laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them, smiling broadly.

“Very well, ser,” Arvin said. “This monster cut four of my highly trained operatives to pieces in an instant. The only reason I’m standing here before you now is because she chose to let me go. I strongly recommend that you proceed with caution.”

Rosenmarie regarded him with faint surprise.

“She’s even got a shimmer nervous? First Vollmer’s death, then this—now I’m *really* interested.”

“You may of course be interested, my lady, but—” Rosenmarie held up a hand, and Arvin stopped.

“That’s enough. Your advice as a shimmer is gratefully received,” she said.

When it came to shimmers, people tended to focus on their top-rate intelligence training and unfailing martial ability. Guyel, however, judged their true value to be in their exceptional analytical skills, backed up by a wealth of experience. Rosenmarie knew that too; that was why she hadn’t flatly refused the shimmer’s advice.

There was a pause, then Arvin said, “Pardon my frankness, my lady. I will take my leave of you here.” He turned and exited the command room. Guyel heard the sound of the latch click as he turned back to Rosenmarie.

“How are we going to deal with them?” he asked.

“Where are they?”

“As we expected, the Seventh Legion has made the Emaleid Citadel its base. I imagine the main force will join them, given time.”

“All right...” said Rosenmarie. “Just keep an eye on them for now.” She closed her eyes and sank back into her chair.

“You only wish us to watch them, my lady?” Guyel asked. His words carried the unsaid question, *We’re not sending another force after them?*

On one hand, he knew full well that sending in another army would be a wasted effort, and he didn’t condone the tragic loss of more soldiers. On the other, he’d just heard Rosenmarie herself say the monster had her interest, which meant he didn’t have many options if he was going to keep Rosenmarie from going on a rampage.

“That’s right. The Seventh Legion can’t retake the north without going through the Crimson Knights. They’ll have to come to me eventually, whether they like it or not,” she replied, then opened her eyes again and smiled. As he looked at her, Guyel couldn’t help the anxiety that swelled in his heart.

The Command Station at the Emaleid Citadel

Two weeks after the Independent Cavalry Regiment arrived at the Emaleid Citadel, Paul joined them with a force of twenty-five thousand soldiers. Their messengers informed him of the battle with the Crimson Knights, and he called Osmund to the command station without taking even a moment to rest.

“...and then, Major General Osmund, you engaged the enemy without waiting for the Independent Cavalry Regiment?”

“Yes, ser. I believed that if we waited, it would affect morale...”

“You fool!” bellowed Paul, his voice like a thunderclap. Not just Osmund, but almost every other officer crowded in the command tent cowered before him. The only exception was Otto, who stood at Paul’s side, collected as ever.

What a mess, Paul thought. He could see the logic in Osmund’s excuse. After

the cruel murder of his scouts followed by the display of bodies for all to see, to do nothing would undoubtedly have impacted morale. If Osmund had thought things through, however, he would have realized that it was a trap to lure him out. It was impossible to overlook the rashness of his actions. There was little doubt in Paul's mind that if Olivia and the Independent Cavalry Regiment had not made it in time, Osmund's regiment would have been wiped out. They might have won in the end, but his army wasn't so forgiving as to excuse everything else because of that. Osmund had thrown away around half his force—fifteen hundred soldiers—for nothing. It was a heavy blow to the Seventh Legion on the eve of the greater battle that was coming. They would face an army led by the fearsome Crimson Knights. It was unavoidable if they were to retake the north. Until that day, Paul could not condone any needless losses. Numbers were power. The size of their force alone could turn the tide of the whole battle.

“Were you so desperate for glory and advancement?” Paul demanded. Osmund gaped at him.

“N-No, ser!” he cried, his eyes flicking nervously about. “I only wanted to protect the city, I—!”

Paul cut him off. “Enough pathetic excuses. You call yourself a general? Whatever it was, you'll be answering for the deaths of half your soldiers”

“Yes, ser. I'm sorry, ser...”

“I'll deal with you later. Return to your quarters and await further orders.”

“Yes, ser.”

Osmund left, his shoulders slumped. Paul spared him only a glance before sinking deeply into his chair and pulling out a cigarette.

“He's a good soldier when he can keep his head...” he said, exhaling a mouthful of smoke as he spoke. Otto smiled thinly.

“I think Major General Osmund was getting impatient,” he said.

“Ah, advancement... How he could think this was the time...”

“I don’t disagree, my lord, but coming on the heels of our own promotions, I do not think he will find us convincing on the subject,” Otto said. Paul had to admit there was some truth in that. Not enough, however, for him to forgive a man who’d led half an army to their deaths chasing his own glory. Osmund said he’d struck first to protect the city. That in itself was not necessarily a bad move. In Osmund’s position, he might have thought the same. Riding out without a thought for what came after and playing right into the enemy’s plan, on the other hand...it was utter foolishness. Selim, who had pushed back against Osmund to the last, had grasped the situation far more clearly. If nothing else, Osmund’s days as general were over.

“This really is a mess,” he growled. As he tried to work out how to deal with Osmund, they heard the sound of skipping footsteps, perfectly rhythmical and growing nearer.

“It appears the *problem child* has arrived,” said Otto, looking at the grandfather clock then to the door.

“Problem? What problem? You know, I’ve always thought you’re too hard on Major Olivia, Otto.”

“That is only because you spoil her, my lord!” Otto snapped back, a vein bulging in his forehead as he rounded on Paul, who shrank back. There was an enthusiastic rapping on the door, followed by a voice like a bell.

“Major Olivia, reporting on time!”

“Enter,” said Otto coldly. The door burst open, and there stood Olivia, her pocket watch clasped tightly in her hand. The deep blue base tone of her uniform only further highlighted the beauty of her shining silver hair and perfectly formed features. It had been a month since Paul had seen her last, but she appeared to be in as good spirits as ever.

“Welcome,” said Paul.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, General Paul!” Olivia said happily. “And, um, nice to see you too, Colonel Otto.”

“You don’t sound as though you mean it when it comes to me, Major,” said Otto.

“That’s just your imagination, ser!” Olivia said. She gave a toothy grin in response to Otto’s cold glare. Paul smiled fondly at both of them, then brought them back to the issue at hand.

“Major Olivia, first let me say that you did a splendid job. Allow me to thank you again. It’s thanks to your efforts that Osmund’s regiment escaped total annihilation.”

“Yes, ser! Your praise is appreciated, sir!”

“Good, good. Now, tell me,” Paul went on. “What was it like fighting the Crimson Knights? Lieutenant Claudia has already given me her report, but I’d like to hear your thoughts directly.”

“My impression, you mean?” asked Olivia. She put a finger to her cheek and frowned, her mouth tightening. In the report Claudia had given Paul, she concluded that the Crimson Knights were just as powerful as the rumors suggested. They would be in for a rude awakening if they tried to fight them like any other enemy. He waited for Olivia’s reply, thoughts turning over in his mind.

“Well, they were really well trained,” she said eventually. “I thought all the individual soldiers were exceptional warriors. When it comes to overall power, they’ve got us beat, ser.”

“Thank you, Major...” sighed Paul. “Not an enemy to be trifled with, then.”

If a soldier as extraordinary as Olivia judged it so, he thought, it had to be true. It was an unwritten rule of war that when facing a superior force, you beat them with numbers. Unfortunately, the Seventh Legion had neither the superior force nor the greater numbers at the moment.

“Don’t worry, though, General Paul. Everything’s going to be fine,” said Olivia, smiling.

“Hm? Mind explaining yourself?” he said. Whatever basis Olivia had for making such reassurances, it was lost on him.

“I’m going to kill the enemy commander,” she replied cheerfully. “I had a ra—I mean, a shimmer—send her a message for me. If you take out the commander, even the strongest army will break. So everything is going to be

fine.” She brimmed with confidence as she spoke, and Paul had to smile. After she’d taken out the enemy commander at Ilys so flawlessly, it was the most reassuring thing she could have said. Olivia had become totally indispensable to the Seventh Legion. He still got the odd pang of guilt over sending a sweet young girl into battle, but he told himself that sometimes you had to act in the name of the greater good. He meant at the very least to do everything he could for the girl in the meantime.

“Is that right?” Paul chuckled. “I can just leave things to you again this time?”

“Yep, no proble—um, I mean, of course, ser!” she replied enthusiastically.

“On that note, do you mind if I ask the major a question?” Otto asked. Paul smiled, and nodded to give his permission.

“Major, I hear that in the desert town of Sephin you encountered a shimmer. The northern division of the imperial army—let’s call them the northern army. Can you confirm that the northern army has made the Seventh Legion’s defeat their objective?”

“Yes, ser. I heard it directly from the shimmer himself, so I think it’s safe to say it’s accurate. Which means Ashton’s hunch was right,” Olivia said, adding quietly, “The tactician knew best.”

Otto frowned. He doubted Paul wanted to be reminded how he had passed over Ashton back at the war council. If he was being honest, Otto hadn’t imagined that Ashton possessed such deductive powers. He would have to improve his evaluation of the boy yet again.

“The thing I don’t follow is this,” Paul said. “Are the imperials really so upset because we took Fort Caspar? I can’t work out what their commanders are thinking.”

The Seventh Legion had succeeded in retaking Fort Caspar and ousting the imperial army from southern Fernest. In the end, however, their triumph had won them no more than that. Kier Fortress remained under imperial control, which meant the empire still held Fernest in its grasp. In other words, little had changed in the overall shape of the war. That left the question—why was the northern army so fixated on the Seventh Legion? Paul couldn’t think of anything.

“It’s hard to imagine that the loss of Fort Caspar was so serious a blow to the imperial army,” said Otto, thinking along the same lines. “The only other possibility...” He paused, his sharp gaze drifting for a moment. “...is a personal grudge, don’t you think, ser? If we killed someone dear to their commander, for example.”

“A personal grudge...” Paul echoed, trying to think through this unexpected theory. “A personal grudge...” Privately, he struggled to accept it. This was the commander of the northern army—would a person in such a position really use their army to settle personal grievances? From the way Otto kept rubbing his chin, Paul had the impression that he himself was skeptical of the idea. Paul crushed the remains of his cigarette in the ashtray, and pulled another from his breast pocket.

“Oh, well. Thinking in circles won’t bring us any closer to an answer. Right now, all we can say for certain is that the northern army has its sights set on the Seventh Legion,” he said. The fact that the Crimson Knights, known for their overwhelming strength, had only sent a regiment-sized force meant that this had been reconnaissance-in-force rather than a serious attack. It made sense that the real attack could follow at any time. With that in mind, Paul thought it prudent to decide their strategy going forward.

“As you say, my lord,” said Otto. “I’ll see to it that we are ready to meet them when the time comes.”

“Thank you, Otto,” said Paul. “Now, Major Olivia.”

“Yes, ser!”

“You will continue to be central to our strategy. And I remember what you said earlier—don’t let me down.”

“Yes, ser! You can count on me, ser!” said Olivia, with a smart salute. Her eyes burned with a determination Paul wasn’t used to, and it made him inexplicably uneasy.

What’s gotten into her today? She’s all fired up for some reason... he thought. *She hasn’t even asked me for cake.* He looked at Otto, and saw the other man regarding Olivia with a searching expression. Otto clearly found it strange as well. Paul decided that if her fighting spirit was running high, that could only be

a good thing, even if he didn't understand why.

"That's all," he said. "You're dismissed, Major."

"Yes, ser! Thank you, ser!" Olivia left as instructed, muttering incomprehensibly as she exited the room. Paul strained to hear, and just made out something about a "Mr. Fish Face" and a library. He couldn't make heads or tails of it.

II

The Emaleid Citadel held much strategic significance, which its design reflected. The citadel was divided into three districts: the residential district, where the majority of its citizens had their homes; the warehouse district, which provided interim storage for grain harvested in the north and other crops; and the military district, where the army garrison was stationed.

Ashton and Olivia left one of the barracks, crossing from the military district to the main street of the residential district. This was where most shopkeepers set up stalls to sell their wares.

"There're so many stalls, but hardly any humans to visit them," Olivia said to Ashton, peering into the different stalls with great interest. Before the war, Ashton had heard, people had flocked to this street in throngs. These days, however, there were barely half as many, and Ashton thought he saw something dark in the faces of the people they passed.

"With the world as it is, what can you—hey!" Olivia, who had been walking by his side a moment ago, had vanished. He looked around frantically, then spotted her in front of a nearby stall, standing rooted to the spot like a statue. He let out a breath of relief, then caught a whiff of something savory. "Don't just disappear like that! You scared me."

He came up behind Olivia, but she paid him no attention. Her eyes were fixed on the skewers of meat arrayed before them. It was freshly grilled chicken coated in a golden, sweet-smelling sauce. It looked so appetizing that Ashton would have already been loosening the strings on his purse if they hadn't just come from breakfast.

“This here is Emaleid’s specialty,” said the shopkeeper, a stout woman in her forties. She flashed them a saleswoman’s winning smile. “Go on, one for the road?”

“Ashton, I want it,” Olivia said.

“What? It hasn’t been an hour since breakfast and you’re hungry already?”

“Yep. I’m having a growth spurt!” said Olivia.

“I...” Ashton sighed. “Oh, all right.” He turned to the shopkeeper and asked, “How much, then?” When Olivia looked at him with those hopeful eyes, it was beyond his powers to resist.

“One silver each,” said the woman nonchalantly as Ashton reluctantly pulled out his purse.

“Silver—?!” he yelped. “Isn’t...Isn’t that a bit pricey? My family are merchants, I’ll have you know. I know what things cost.” It wasn’t unusual for street sellers to change their prices depending on who was buying. Ashton’s experience told him this should be ten coppers at most, but he also knew that the woman had been glancing at their epaulets since they arrived. In a city with a military district, the people would’ve been used to seeing soldiers about. It made sense that they’d be able to distinguish rank as well.

“Look, Warrant Officer, don’t think I looked at your rank and decided to try and cheat you. Do you really think that kind of thing flies with military types?” the woman said.

“Um?!” Ashton gaped, taken aback to have been caught so easily. The woman rolled her eyes and sighed.

“If you’re a merchant’s son, you should understand,” she said. “Have you seen the prices on food lately?”

Ashton, of course, didn’t need to be told how expensive food supplies had become, but one silver was still absurdly high compared to prices back in the capital. If she wasn’t cheating him, there was only one other explanation. The impact of the empire’s conquests was already being felt throughout the whole of the north. Ashton took two silver coins from his purse, and held them out to the woman.

“I’m sorry if I sounded suspicious. I’ll take two of those skewers,” he said. The woman laughed.

“Oh dear, I’ve gone and made you feel sorry for me,” she said, but she packed up two skewers with practiced hands and passed them over. Olivia took them with a delighted smile, then immediately began to devour one. The woman watched her, nothing but kindness in her eyes. It reminded Ashton of a mother looking at her own child.

“What do you think, Major?” asked the woman.

“It’s amazing!” Olivia said happily, and the woman’s face broke into a genuine smile.



“I’m glad to hear it.” she said. “When I heard the empire had come to attack Emaleid, I thought it was all over. You’re the ones who chased them off, right? I haven’t seen your faces around before.”

“Ah, yes,” Ashton said. “I suppose we are.”

“I knew it. You’re pretty young yourself, Warrant Officer, but the major here is just a child...” she murmured, her eyes growing distant. “Is the kingdom really close to falling, then?”

Ashton didn’t know if she realized it, but such a statement in fact violated the Decree for Public Order and Control. If the military police overheard her, they’d throw her in irons. He decided to pretend it hadn’t happened. He could see how the sight of Olivia, a girl too young to be anywhere near a battlefield under ordinary circumstances, made the situation appear even more dire.

Olivia, having gobbled down the remainder of her skewer, stared curiously into the woman’s eyes.

“Would it make you sad if the kingdom fell?” she asked. “Would you cry?”

“Well, yes, I think so...” said the woman. “It certainly isn’t perfect, but it’s where I was born and raised. I think I’d shed a tear or two for it.”

“Huh...” said Olivia. She was quiet for a moment, then said, “Not to worry! We’re going to drive the imperial army out of the north, so there’ll be nothing to cry about.” She rolled her sleeves up and flexed her muscles. The woman burst out in loud and hearty laughter that made her belly shake.

“Dear me, is that so!” she said. “You’re going to send the imperial army on their way for us? Well, my dear, I’m very much looking forward to that day.” She wrapped up the rest of the skewers she was grilling and, to Olivia’s great surprise, pressed them into her hands.

“What? Are you sure?” Olivia said, blinking.

“Yes, yes, they’re all yours,” the woman said. “In exchange, will you promise me something, dear?”

“A promise? That’s fine. Like I said, I’m going to send the imperial army packing.”

“No, not that,” the woman said. Without another word, she enveloped Olivia in a hug.

“Um...?” Olivia mumbled.

“Now you listen to me, Major,” the woman said. “You promise me you won’t die. You’ve still got your whole life ahead of you.” That was all—she just wanted Olivia to be safe. Olivia seemed too dazed to move, but little by little, a shy smile spread over her face.

“Got it!” she said. “I promise. After all, after you die, there’s no more tasty food or sweets. *Or* meat skewers,” she added. She stepped back from the woman, then took a large bite from the second skewer.

Ashton and Olivia bid the woman farewell, then set off again on their original course.

“Hey, you still haven’t told me where we’re going,” said Olivia, devouring skewer after skewer as they walked.

“Just shush and follow me,” Ashton replied, ushering her along without offering any clue to their destination. They left the main street and wove through a series of narrow alleys until at last, they arrived.

“We’re here, Olivia,” Ashton announced. In front of them was a roughly constructed brick building surrounded by a tangled thicket of trees. A thin wisp of smoke trailed from the chimney. Anyone who failed to notice the unobtrusive little sign would never guess that this was a shop.

Ashton himself had passed right by it many times when he first came here.

“Is this...” Olivia hesitated, puzzled. “Is this a blacksmith?” With a sideways look at her, Ashton pushed open the door to the shop. A bright clanging sound rang out, and they saw the blacksmith himself in the back of the workshop, beating away with his hammer in unbroken concentration. He was every inch the image of a craftsman, with the exception of a rather sweet pink apron.

“I’m closed for orders, so—!” he began, then his eyes landed on Ashton. “Oh, it’s you...” he said. He put his hammer back in its box, then stretched and stood up.

“I’m sorry to bother you when you’re so busy,” Ashton said. “I was just wondering if my order was ready yet.”

“Aye, it’s ready. Finished it up yesterday, and it came out mighty fine, if I do say so myself. Wait here a spell,” he said, before heading out to the back of the workshop. He returned moments later cradling a large wooden box in his arms. Placing it down on the workbench, he said, “Open it up, then.” Ashton lifted the lid, and there lay a set of armor covered in fine silver filigree. Engraved on the left shoulder and breastplate was a glittering skull surrounded by roses set against two crossed scythes—the crest of the House of Valedstorm. The blacksmith had gone above and beyond what Ashton had asked for. He nodded, delighted.

“It’s absolutely perfect,” he said. “I see how you got your reputation as one of the three best blacksmiths in Fernest.”

“Flatter me all you like, but don’t think you’re getting out of paying off the rest,” said the blacksmith, folding his tree-trunk-like arms with a loud huff.

“Of course,” Ashton replied. “You get what you pay for, after all.” That was one of his father’s favorite expressions. It was his father’s keen eye that had brought prosperity to the Senefelder business.

“Hmph. You’re young, but you’ve got your head screwed on right,” said the blacksmith with a grin. Olivia peered over Ashton’s shoulder at the armor, and let out a gasp of wonder.

“Ashton, you didn’t!”

“The real battle’s about to begin, right?” Ashton said. “No matter how strong you are, there’s still a chance you could get hurt. So I thought, at the very least, you should have a good set of armor.”

“Aye, this plate is tough as anything—I guarantee it,” the blacksmith said. “All steel, beat paper-thin and built up, layer upon layer. It’ll take a good beating for you.” He paused, looking at Olivia with something like awe. “You know, I didn’t know whether to believe you last time, but now I see her it all makes sense. There’s something special about this girl, though I couldn’t rightly say what it is. All I know is if I saw her on the battlefield, I’d be running hard in the opposite direction.” From what Ashton had heard, the blacksmith had once been a

mercenary of considerable skill in his youth, traveling from country to country to fight in their wars. That experience must have allowed him to see what he did in Olivia.

“I’m just happy to hear you believe me,” Ashton said, then turned to Olivia. “What do you think, then? I asked for it to be ebony black to match your sword. Do you like it?”

Olivia was silent for a moment. “Can I touch it?” she asked at length.

“What do you think? It’s yours, of course you can,” he said. When Olivia hesitated, he took her by the shoulders and pushed her forward to stand in front of the armor. She gazed down at the armor with an intensity he rarely saw in her, then reached down to brush her fingers over it.

Well, I also thought blood wouldn’t stand out as much on black, Ashton thought. *She scares the new recruits half to death when she shows up drenched in blood.* He’d been terrified himself at first, so he knew all too well just how they felt.

“Thank you, Ashton!” Olivia said. “I love it! It’s the coolest thing ever!”

“I’m glad you think so,” he said. The smile Olivia gave him made him feel like his soul had come unmoored from his body. Feeling his face grow hot, he concealed it with a cough, then saw the blacksmith smirking at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just remembering my youth,” the blacksmith replied, rubbing his perfectly bald head and smiling even more broadly. Ashton, feeling a little uncomfortable, hastened to pull out the remaining coins he owed. No sooner had he handed them over than Olivia seized his hand and started dragging him towards the door.

“Come on, we’ve got to get back to the barracks to show Claudia!” she said.

“Okay, okay! I’m coming, so stop *yanking*,” Ashton retorted.

“You do your best, kids,” said the blacksmith as they left. His grin was as broad as ever.

Fort Larswood in Wells, Northern Fernest

“Have you heard the stories, Kirrus? They say on nights like tonight when the moon is pale—that’s when *it* appears.” Lloyd gazed distantly up at the silver moon obscured by hazy clouds as he spoke. Kirrus, his companion on sentry duty, yawned widely.

“Hm?” Kirrus said blearily. “Oh, you mean that story about the god of death?” He yawned again.

“Hey, we’re supposed to be on watch,” said Lloyd.

“Well, yeah, but come on,” Kirrus replied. “Who’s going to waste their time trekking out to the back end of nowhere to attack this sorry excuse for a fort? You know you’re the only one actually keeping watch, right?” He looked back at the rudimentary wooden fort and snorted. True to Kirrus’s words, Lloyd could just hear his fellow sentries laughing on the other side of the gate, all totally at ease. He gave a loud and deliberate sigh of exasperation.

It had been a month since it all began. A girl with silver hair, clad in ebony-black armor, appearing to assail their forces throughout the north. In addition to slaughtering all the soldiers, she also took their belongings. More and more soldiers were succumbing to the fear that this god of death would come for them next. Happily for Lloyd, however, no one had yet heard of her appearing in Wells.

“That might be true, but we still have to w—”

“Shh!” Kirrus said suddenly, pressing a finger to his lips. “There, in the grass. Did you hear that?” For a moment Lloyd wondered if Kirrus was just trying to shut him up, but the other man’s eyes were serious. For all he complained, it seemed, he’d still been on alert.

“I didn’t hear anything...” Lloyd said. “Couldn’t it just be a spotted rabbit?” He scanned the bushes, but couldn’t hear anything out of the ordinary.

“No. It didn’t sound like a rabbit...” Kirrus said slowly. “I’m going to take a look.”

“By yourself?”

“Honestly, Lloyd.” Under the red light of the torches, Kirrus looked exasperated. “There’s two of us on gate duty, right? How’d it look if we both left our post?” It was a good point, and Lloyd couldn’t think of a counterargument.

“Okay, you’re right. But let me know the moment anything happens.”

“Yeah. You keep an eye out too, Lloyd.”

“Got it,” he said. Kirrus advanced silently towards the bushes, holding his spear out in front of him. Just as Lloyd lost sight of him there was a swoosh like leaves being cut. Lloyd assumed Kirrus was using his spear to check for anything that might be lurking there.

He looked down at the whistle that hung around his neck. If something did happen, he’d use it to let the others know right away.

A warm breeze swirled lazily around him. Lloyd had his eyes peeled for any sign of movement, but couldn’t see anything. Little by little, he started to relax.

I guess Kirrus imagined it after all. He sure is taking his time, though... he thought. It must have been at least ten minutes since Kirrus went into the bushes. He didn’t have a watch, so he couldn’t say with total accuracy, but he was sure it was around that. He was just starting to feel irritated when he realized that the noise of the spear had stopped. The words *god of death* rose unbidden in the back of his mind.

Don’t be daft, Lloyd, he told himself. *Kirrus was right. No death god is going to bother with us out here.* His mind tried to deny it, but his body betrayed him. He felt sweat dripping from all over his body and he was on full alert once again.

“Hey, Kirrus!” he shouted with forced cheerfulness. “What’re you doing out there? If you still haven’t found anything I think we’re probably okay!” He felt like if he didn’t do something he was going to succumb to his nerves. He waited and waited, but Kirrus didn’t reply. Lloyd called out again, his voice ringing through the silence of the night, but no other voice answered. The only sound was the clear chirping of insects.

Okay, something is wrong. There's no way he didn't hear me. In a panic, Lloyd reached for his whistle—and that was the last thing he ever did.

“Phew, I thought we were done for a second there. Well done, ser.”

A fluttering laugh. “Flattery won’t get you anywhere, Gauss! If we find any good alcohol in their supplies, I’ll make sure you get it, though.”

“Hah, something to look forward to.”

Olivia sprang from the bushes, mini ballista in one hand. Gauss rested his bloody sword on his shoulder and walked forward, the soldiers of the Independent Cavalry Regiment following at his heels.

“I still can’t believe you can see this well, ser,” Gauss said, looking down at a body with an arrow sticking out of its forehead. “They had torches, sure, but that’s not normal, getting a perfect shot from that distance.” He seemed a little awestruck.

“It’s just practice, Gauss. You could learn to do it too.”

“Me? No, no way. Absolutely not.”

“Too bad,” Olivia replied. Now she thought about it, some humans were just like that—like Ashton, who never got any better with a sword no matter how hard he tried. Olivia quickly turned her mind to the next matter at hand: directing her soldiers to prepare flaming arrows. At Gauss’s signal, they spread out silently around the fort, ready to shoot at her command.

“We’re ready, Captain,” Gauss said. “Are you really sure we should go through with this, though?” Olivia nodded.

“This fort has no strategic value to Fernest right now. Burning everyone inside at once will save us time, plus it means we avoid losing any of our own soldiers,” she explained, smiling at Gauss, who looked uncomfortable, but nodded all the same.

“All right. Guess we should get started then,” he said. Olivia gave her signal, and the flaming arrows soared up before raining down on the wooden fort like shooting stars. There had been no rain in these parts for some time, and even

the air was dry as dust. In the blink of an eye, the whole structure erupted into an inferno. Olivia watched as the fort slowly turned to ash and collapsed, then looked back to the gate.

“The survivors will probably try and make a run for it, so keep those arrows coming,” she called out. “Oh, right. I’ll help too, of course.” The sight of her standing there, mini ballista in hand, got all the soldiers fired up. She expected almost everyone would burn to death, but better safe than sorry.

An agonized scream rang out. “Fire! Everything’s on fire!”

“Hurry! Come *on*, get the gate open!”

It wasn’t long before yells and screams could be heard from the other side of the gate. Some few humans had indeed survived the blaze. They heard the bolt being lifted, and a dull, heavy scraping as the gate swung slowly open. As soon as there was enough space for a single person to squeeze through, the imperial soldiers scrambled over each other to get out first. They were met with a merciless barrage of arrows, and one after another, they collapsed to the ground, so peppered with arrows they resembled hedgehogs. Through all this, one soldier came charging out, weaving past incoming arrows, his eyes wild.

“You animals!” he screamed. “Did you enjoy that, you bastards?!”

“Huh? Oh, I’m out of arrows,” said Olivia. She slung the mini ballista back on her back, then, in the same breath, slashed her sword out. The imperial soldier fell apart in a spray of blood and viscera, his body split in two right down the middle. Olivia immediately wiped the blood from her blade and sheathed it. She heard the new recruits behind her gasp.

“On that note, Captain, do you happen to know what the imperial army has taken to calling you?” Gauss asked. His eyes were on her ebony-black armor—or more specifically, the crest that adorned her left shoulder. Olivia, wondering what note he was talking about, nodded.

“The god of death, right? It’s a *much* better name than monster, don’t you think?”

“You didn’t like being called ‘monster,’ but you’re fine with ‘god of death’?”

“Yep!”

“Why is that, ser? They don’t seem all that different to me.”

“Why, indeed...” said Olivia with a faint smile. She ordered Gauss to move out. As the last charred remains of Fort Larswood crumbled to the ground, the soldiers of the Independent Cavalry Regiment melted away into the night.

IV

The Independent Cavalry Regiment was in the midst of an intensive divide-and-conquer strategy. Although the lords of the north had folded to the empire, amongst the common folk, resentment towards their conquerors was alive and well. Under such conditions, even a small spark could spread out of control. To head off any unpleasant surprises, Rosenmarie had spread her forces out over vast swathes of the north after subduing the region. It was precisely this that Independent Cavalry Regiment’s current strategy was taking advantage of. Taking half the north in one blow meant that, without realizing it, the imperial army had spread its troops too thin. In a series of nighttime ambushes, the Independent Cavalry Regiment had already taken out fifteen imperial companies, as well as three small forts. The traitorous lords had, without meaning to, ended up creating highly favorable conditions for the Seventh Legion.

As the architect of this plan, Ashton sat with Olivia and Claudia around a campfire, eating a late dinner.

“Everything’s going according to plan so far,” Claudia said, holding a roasted drumstick in one hand and marking an X on the map spread at her feet with the other.

“For now, anyway,” Ashton muttered darkly. Intelligence reports indicated that the combined forces of the northern army had over seventy thousand soldiers. The Seventh Legion, meanwhile, had only twenty-five thousand. Their divide-and-conquer campaign had brought the empire’s number down to around sixty thousand now, but they were still outnumbered more than two to one. In open battle, they had no hope of victory.

“Our enemy is no fool,” Claudia said. “She’ll have realized her mistake in spreading out her forces by now. We’ll be in trouble if she decides to call them

all back together.”

“I agree, Lieutenant. That’s why I think we should call an end to the divide-and-conquer plan now.”

“Wait, what? I’m not following,” said Claudia. She frowned, and looked down at the map again. “Shouldn’t we keep trying to shave down their numbers right down to the last moment?”

“Sorry, Lieutenant. Let me explain properly,” Ashton said. “What I mean is, we don’t need it any more. Here.” He pulled a letter from his jacket and held it out to Claudia. “I think this will make things clearer.” It was a letter from the intelligence team Ashton had put together to support their mission.

“Oh? Let’s see it then,” Claudia said. She unfolded the letter. The Independent Cavalry Regiment’s success, it read, had inspired a rapid increase in anti-empire sentiments amongst the common folk. They had also placed spies within the enemy forces who were spreading rumors of coming revolt.

“I see,” said Claudia when she finished reading. “So you’ve been doing intelligence manipulation behind the scenes. Yes, this should mean they hesitate before calling their forces back. No one likes the idea of being stabbed from behind. Am I right to think that this was the real goal of our plan all along?”

“You are correct, ser. We could only ever reduce the empire’s numbers so much. As it says in the letter, the common folk’s anti-imperial sentiments are growing stronger. We add in rumors of insurrection to the mix, and the empire can’t afford to ignore it. Do you know how many people live in the lands they conquered?”

“Around...” Claudia’s eyes flicked up for a second as she recalled the figure. “Three million or so, I think.”

“That’s right, ser. And that means the imperial forces stationed around the region have to be very, very careful how they act. At least, that’s how I see it.” Stronger than chains of iron were the invisible chains of fear and uncertainty. Ashton was confident that with this, around thirty thousand of the imperial army’s soldiers were effectively no longer a threat.

“Ashton...” said Claudia, looking at him with awe. “You’re terrifying.” Ashton scratched his face, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“I’m doing everything I can to survive, ser. That’s all. Now we should match the Crimson Knights for numbers—the northern army’s main force. We might be able to give them an even fight.” The Crimson Knights, stationed around Windsome Castle, had twenty-seven thousand soldiers. Contrary to what he said out loud, however, Ashton privately thought that they were still at a horrible disadvantage. Their one encounter with the Crimson Knights at the Amalheim Plains had given him an up-close look at their enemy’s fearsome strength. He wasn’t going to underestimate them.

“We’ve come this far thanks to you, Ashton,” said Claudia. “Now let us handle the rest. When it comes to a real fight, you’re a liability!”

Ashton forced a laugh at Claudia’s teasing, and said, “You’re right there, ser.”

Despite his ongoing lessons with Olivia, his sword and spear work had shown absolutely no improvement. Gile, who’d been conscripted at the same time as him, must have had some innate talent for fighting, because he’d improved so much it was hard to believe he was the same man who’d trembled with fear at the sight of bandits. In fact, this was true of all the new recruits who’d been on that first mission to Fort Lamburke.

Lately, Olivia had taken to telling him, in a voice that was just a little too kind, “Humans are good at some things, and not so good at others.” Given Gile had, indirectly, told him the same thing in the past, Ashton was trying to convince himself that he was okay with this.

Everyone has their role to play, he told himself. Balance, that’s the important thing. It doesn’t bother me at all.

“Major Olivia looks like she’s sleeping well,” Claudia observed, looking over to where Olivia sat slumped against a tree. She must have been exhausted, because she still held a half-eaten drumstick in one hand. A string of drool dripped from one corner of her greasy mouth. It was hard to believe that this was the god of death who struck fear into the hearts of the imperial army.

“The last few days have been battle after battle,” said Ashton. “I think we’ve been pushing her too hard.”

“Mm...” said Claudia. Then she suddenly burst out, “Doesn’t it just infuriate you that they’ve started calling her a god of death?” She brandished her fist as she went on. “Who ever heard of a god of death this sweet and beautiful? If anything, she’s an angel!” The speech was a little ridiculous, but Claudia herself was dead serious. Ashton, taken aback, mumbled a half-hearted reply, only to find Claudia glaring angrily at him.

“What’re you mumbling for? This is your fault, you know. Getting the Valedstorm crest carved into her armor...” Feeling that this was even more ridiculous, Ashton looked pointedly at Claudia’s own silver armor and the crest—a winged helmet over a shield—engraved there.

“My fault? Getting your crests engraved into your armor is what you nobles *do*,” he protested. “Isn’t that the Jung crest, Lieutenant?”

“I... Well, yes, but...” Claudia turned away from him as though to hide the crest. She got like this every now and then when the subject of house crests came up, and everything was always Ashton’s fault. For some reason, she couldn’t bear Olivia being called a god of death. Whenever Ashton tried to ask why, however, she dodged the question, so he was still in the dark as to the root of her anger.

“Ser, I agree that the Valedstorm crest is creepy, but I’m pretty sure that’s not the only reason they call her that,” he said. A skull, red roses, and two crossed scythes. He could certainly see the “god of death” connection, but if he were to pinpoint the real origin of the name, he thought it was more likely Olivia’s own exploits and the way she kept cutting through imperial soldiers like training dummies. He was now totally comfortable with seeing corpses cut cleanly in half, thanks to her. Gile and some of the others praised what she did as “the highest form of art.” Ashton expected it wouldn’t be long before Gile, whose faith in Olivia bordered on fanatical, started calling her a goddess. That wasn’t how the imperial army saw her, though. Which brought them here.

“Oh? Then what do you think the reason is?” Claudia demanded, rounding on him threateningly, her eyes serious. Ashton decided *the way she slices people up like sausage meat* wasn’t a good answer here.

“I, um...” he stammered. “But I mean, it doesn’t seem to bother Olivia.”

“Yes, that’s true. I don’t understand it at all,” said Claudia, cocking her head and looking utterly baffled. “She hated it when they called her a monster.”

Olivia didn’t mind being called a god of death at all. On the contrary, she seemed to be enjoying it. Ashton suspected that was why Claudia kept all her frustration pent up like this instead of voicing it openly. It was obvious from her body language as she flung more branches onto the fire. Ashton, who often ended up on the receiving end of her outbursts, was getting sick of it.

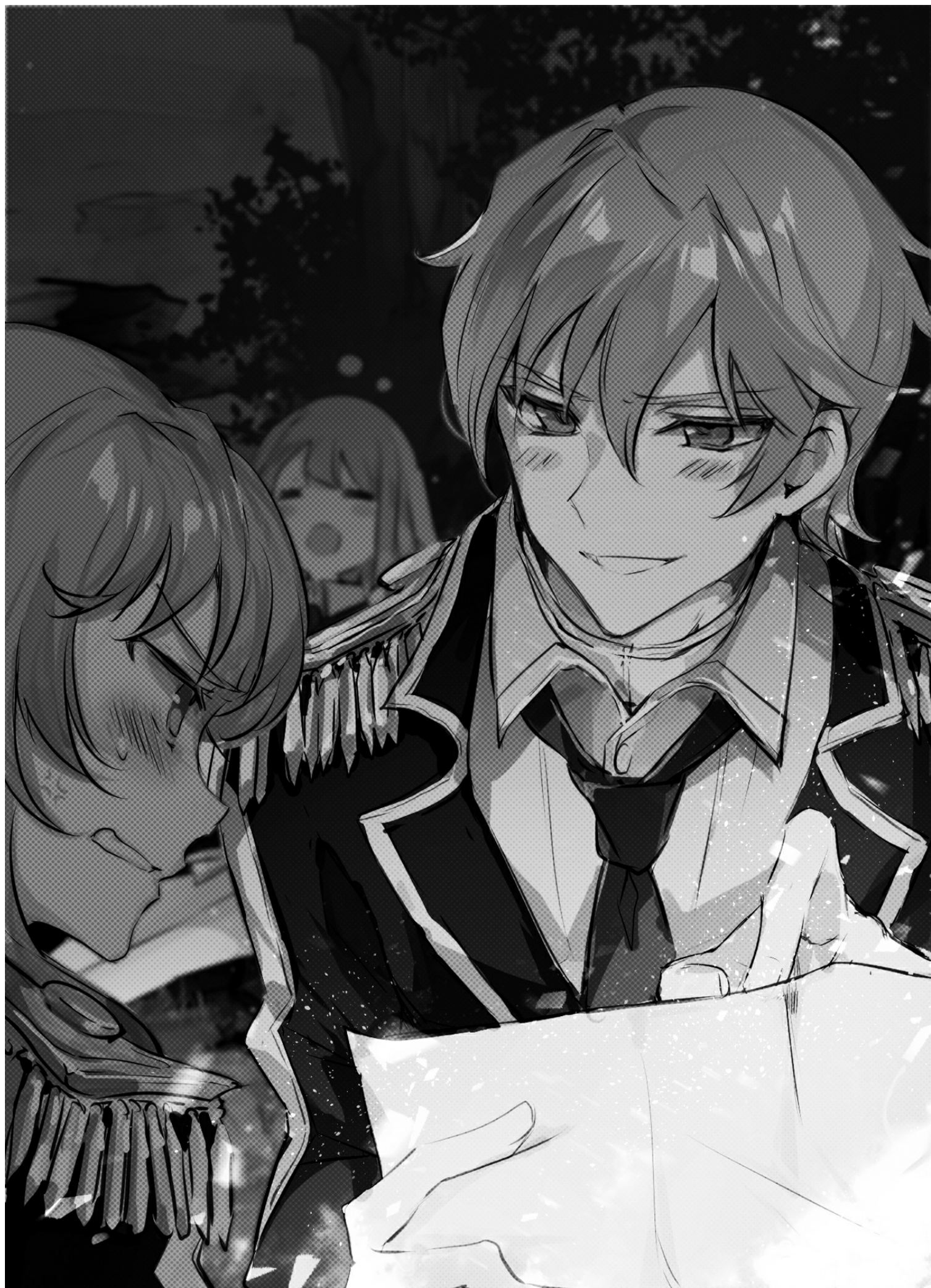
“Well, how about this,” he tried again. “A god of death is still a god, right? Maybe she likes being thought of as a deity.”

“Of all the damned fool—!” Claudia shouted, then caught herself. “Sorry,” she muttered. “I shouldn’t speak so.” She threw a sharp look at Ashton, who stared at her, then turned her face away, clearing her throat. Her cheeks were slightly pink. She was embarrassed over her outburst.

“Huh. That’s another side to you, Lieutenant,” Ashton remarked.

“What are you smirking for?” she snapped back.

“I’m not, ser, it was just...unexpected. I know I shouldn’t say this to a superior officer, but it was actually quite cute.”



“C-Cute?!” Claudia said, now unmistakably bright red. “H-How dare you! You watch your mouth, *Warrant Officer!*” She threw another branch onto the fire. Ashton laughed, rubbing his head apologetically.

“Ashton, Claudia, be quiet!” They both spun around, but Olivia was still fast asleep. She must have been sleep-talking. Ashton met Claudia’s eyes, and they both snorted with laughter.

“Well, anyway,” said Claudia, her smile soft now. “The hard part is about to begin. Let’s make sure we’re ready.” She held out her hand to him. The Seventh Legion now matched their enemy in numbers, but that enemy was still the Crimson Knights. Any mistake, no matter how small, could be disastrous. There was a good chance they would die.

Even so, Ashton gripped Claudia’s hand tightly, and said, “Thank you, ser. I’m honored to fight alongside you.” He couldn’t help but feel like so long as he had these two at his side, they could face anything. He looked up at the sky, to where a multitude of stars shone above them.

The Council Chamber at Windsome Castle

A war council was underway in what had formerly been the throne room at Windsome Castle. The attendants sat around a heavy, thick-topped round table. The topic of discussion was none other than the disruptions brought up by the god of death.

“Anti-imperial sentiment is strengthening amongst the common folk after our forces in a number of locations around the north were wiped out by the god of death, my lady,” said an officer. “We’re hearing rumors of open revolt, and all the commanders are requesting reinforcements.”

Rosenmarie frowned. “As if we’d send them reinforcements! How stupid can they get?”

“Should I deny the requests then, ser?”

“Obviously. Tell them to handle it with the soldiers they’ve got. If they’ve got rebels running around, they can burn a village or two, for all I care. Make an example out of them.”

As far as Rosenmarie was concerned, commoners, as a species, were easily swayed. If they did rise up, the sight of a slaughtered town or village would cow them soon enough.

“Yes, my lady. I’ll see to it at once,” said the officer, before hurrying from the room. Another entered shortly afterwards, coming over to whisper something in Guyel’s ear. As he listened, Guyel’s frown grew deeper and deeper.

“What’s up?” Rosenmarie asked.

“It’s a report from our sentries watching Emaleid, my lady. They say the main force has moved out and is heading for Windsome Castle.”

“The main force?” Rosenmarie said, then chuckled. “Well, well. We’ve been outplayed. Whoever the Seventh Legion has on strategy must be quite the mastermind.” The other officers looked at each other in confusion. Guyel leaned forward.

“My lady? What do you mean?” he asked.

“Aren’t you listening? I just told you,” Rosenmarie said, snorting dismissively. For a few moments Guyel sat perfectly still, then he leapt to his feet.

“You don’t mean the Seventh Legion engineered this whole situation?!” he cried. “Surely not, my lady?” There was a pause; then the whole room erupted as everyone realized at once how the Seventh Legion had played them for fools. It was a wretched turn of events, but Rosenmarie wasn’t about to blame her officers for failing to see through a scheme she herself hadn’t seen coming until this very moment.

“You’re commanders, right? Look at the big picture,” she said. “The Seventh Legion has mobilized its main force at the absolute perfect moment to take advantage of the current situation. What more proof do you need?” Depending on how fast they moved, the Seventh Legion would be at Windsome Castle in three or four days at most.

“My lady, doesn’t that mean...” began a young officer hoarsely. “Doesn’t that mean that with the exception of the Crimson Knights, all our forces are effectively useless?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Rosenmarie replied. Amongst the clamor that filled the

council room, Rosenmarie gave a deliberate shrug. Guyel was the hardest hit. He sat staring into space, his lips trembling.

“But if that’s...if that’s true, how can you be so calm, Lady Rosenmarie?” asked an elderly retainer, peering perplexedly at her. “The news seems to have barely affected you at all.” There was a general noise of assent from the others.

“What, were you all hoping to see me get hysterical?” she replied. “I still can, if you want.”

“Oh, no, not at all, my lady!” spluttered the old retainer. The other officers looked away awkwardly. She’d only been teasing, but apparently it hadn’t come across that way.

“There’s nothing to panic about, anyway,” she said. “Our intelligence says the Seventh Legion has twenty-eight thousand soldiers. We have twenty-seven thousand. I hope no one thinks the Crimson Knights are about to lose in an even battle.” She glared around the room at the officers. They all nodded emphatically, their mouths tightly shut.

Guyel broke the silence. “That would, of course, be unthinkable,” he said. “But there is still one problem.” His tone was laden with significance. Rosenmarie knew exactly what he meant without needing further explanation, but she asked regardless. It was more fun that way.

“And what’s that?” she said. Guyel hesitated for a moment, then seemed to steel himself.

“*That*, my lady, is the god of death lurking in their ranks. The god of death who murdered Colonel Vollmer like a cat with a mouse. I must warn against being too optimistic.” He paused again before continuing, picking his words carefully. “Not to mention that this god of death seems to be after you in particular, my lady.”

Rosenmarie laughed. “And what higher honor could there be? Our monster has been promoted to a god of death, and now she’s coming all the way here to see little old me. We’d better make sure to throw her one hell of a welcome party.” Before Guyel could open his mouth again, Rosenmarie moved the conversation on to battle preparations, then dismissed them. She left the council room in high spirits.

Not long now, Death God Olivia, she thought. I'm going to rip that pretty head of yours off and use it to decorate General Osvannes's grave—along with my report of the Seventh Legion's annihilation!

Chapter Six: The Battle of Carnac

I

A message arrived for Paul. The Independent Cavalry Regiment had succeeded in neutralizing a total of thirty thousand imperial troops stationed throughout the north, and called for the Seventh Legion to join them posthaste.

After dismissing the messenger, Paul delivered his orders, and the twenty-five-thousand-strong main force marched for Windsome Castle. After rendezvousing with the Independent Cavalry Regiment they continued their advance, doing away with all the imperial troops they encountered along the way.

“How do you think the enemy commander will respond, my lord?” Otto asked.

“I wonder...” Paul mused, stroking his horse’s neck. “I don’t think they want a siege. Windsome is a lowland castle—it has next to no value as a defensive position. Our enemy is far more dangerous when they’re on the offensive too.”

Otto nodded. “I agree. We can have the catapults we seized ready, but I doubt they’ll be of much use.” Otto was amazed by the catapults the Independent Cavalry Regiment had recovered. After conducting a study of their capabilities, he had concluded that their potency far outshone any of the catapults in the royal army’s arsenal. They were also around a quarter of the size of those catapults, which meant they could be operated by smaller teams. Such machines would revolutionize siege warfare. They were also proof that the empire’s technology was several steps ahead of Fernest’s. As far as Otto was concerned, however, technological superiority alone couldn’t turn the tide of a war. Throughout history, wars turned on the strength of will of those who fought in them. It did, however, point to the root of the empire’s current dominance.

“It might be better to send those back to the capital to have our engineers

disassemble them and do a proper analysis. Besides,” Paul went on, in a rare bout of sentimentality, “that castle was the lifework of Count Tristan Windsome, hero of the kingdom. It might be in enemy hands now, but I don’t think I’ve got it in me to reduce it to rubble.”

Otto knew the story of Tristan Windsome and the Theodore Rebellion of the 800s. In only two days, Tristan had crushed the rebel army of twenty thousand with only two thousand soldiers. Even now, he was remembered as a hero. Otto expected that most people shared Paul’s sentimentality towards the castle. At the same time, the rules of the universe dictated that castles, like every other physical thing, would one day crumble. Knowing this, he himself found it hard to sympathize.

“Assuming, then, that the Crimson Knights go on the offensive, the question becomes where they will choose for their battlefield.”

“Yes. There’s no shortage of locations around here that could work. I honestly have no idea where they’ll go,” Paul said. Otto called up a mental image of the map he’d memorized, and thought through the options. In the vicinity of Windsome Castle alone, three locations occurred to him: the Plains of Salz, the Carnac Ravine, and the Toueffle Plateau. And Paul was right, there were plenty more candidates. It was simply too hard to predict the enemy army’s movements, and Otto decided that they were better off not to waste time in trying.

“There are too many possibilities to be able to narrow it down to one.”

“For now, send scouts out to the locations you think are most likely.”

“Yes, my lord,” Otto said. He summoned the scouts, then gave them their orders. They departed promptly, each in a different direction.

“Thanks to the Independent Cavalry Regiment, we’ll be evenly matched on numbers at least. I expect Major Olivia will play a key role in this battle too. Make sure you stay in close communication with her.”

“Understood, my lord,” Otto replied, seeing Olivia’s carefree smile in his mind’s eye.

Meanwhile, Rosenmarie and the Crimson Knights were on the move. Just as Paul had predicted, she planned to march out and meet the Seventh Legion in a head-on confrontation. The location Rosenmarie chose to station her forces at was a gorge to the southwest of Windsome Castle—the Carnac Ravine. The Bennum River flowed along the base of the gorge, and it was surrounded by lowlying mountains. The Crimson Knights knew the mountains well—it was where they trained. The ravine was an ideal position for them to mount an ambush.

From her command tent atop a low hill, Rosenmarie gazed serenely out over the land as it turned deep red in the light of the setting sun. A pleasant breeze rustled through the leaves, caressing her flaming red hair.

She's beautiful, thought Guyel. He was struck, as he always was, by how Rosenmarie grew lovelier still when she stood on the battlefield. Then, remembering himself, he said, “Our forces are all in formation, my lady.”

Rosenmarie nodded. “The time has come at last,” she said. “All that’s left to do is wait for the Seventh Legion to arrive.”

“Yes, ser,” Guyel replied. “Here, at the hands of the Crimson Knights, the Seventh Legion will meet their doom.”

“Obviously,” she replied. “Oh, I can’t wait to see what our famous Death God Olivia does. She’d better give me her very best performance.” Rosenmarie spun around, her crimson cape emblazoned with the crossed swords of the empire billowing behind her, and returned to her tent.

The following day, just as the sun reached its zenith in the cloudy blue sky, the Seventh Legion made their long-awaited entrance. The rumble of drumbeats echoed from the two camps as though in acknowledgment of one another. A battle cry rose up from both sides. Twenty-eight thousand voices from the Seventh Legion. Twenty-five thousand from the Crimson Knights.

On one side, Paul, fighting to liberate the north from the empire’s tyranny. On the other, Rosenmarie, fighting to destroy the ones who had robbed her of Osvannes. Both commanders alike in their unyielding conviction.

Thus, the Battle of Carnac began.

Rosenmarie divided her army into small units and had them spread out through the ravine, choosing their positions to utilize the uneven terrain and bring the enemy in to engage them at close quarters. Paul's strategy was built on a series of hit-and-run attacks using units based around longbow archers. He knew they were unlikely to fare well in straight combat. As the battle progressed, however, it deviated from both commanders' plans, and the more time passed, the more it began to look like outright chaos. The primary agent of this chaos was the impenetrable mist that often settled in the Carnac Ravine. It poured in over the cliffs on the second day of battle, resulting in a rash of encounter battles throughout the gorge as the two armies lost all visibility.

"Th-The enemy! They're right in front of us!"

"Fall back and repair ranks!"

Rushing footsteps. Ragged breathing. Shouting. Screams. Disordered clanging rang out as swords clashed, and arrows flew randomly in all directions. With each volley, soldiers fell to the ground like flowers in frost, their bodies settling into the mud. The hours went by, and the corpses piled up. In some cases, both sides lost more than nine for every ten of their soldiers. Encounter battles had delivered utter pandemonium.

In the thick of it all, Major Mills Bohmenberk looked down to where an enemy unit sat resting on the other side of the river. Major Mills and his battalion of two thousand infantry were tasked with sneaking around to attack the Seventh Legion from behind. The mist made it impossible to accurately assess the number of soldiers in the unit before him now, but he put them at a few hundred. They didn't seem to have noticed him yet.

This mist has ended up being rather fortuitous. We're supposed to be operating covertly, so I really ought to ignore them, but with those numbers we should be able to take them out in a single blow. A good chance to get morale up... He stopped short, his eye catching on one figure. *Wait, isn't that Death God Olivia?!* The words almost came bursting out loud, he was so taken aback. He clamped his mouth tightly shut.

The soldier across the river wore black armor embellished with the death

god's crest, and her long hair was silver, a shade rarely seen in the empire. What was more, in her hand, wrapped in dark mist, was an ebony blade. He'd heard whispers that it drank human blood, and he more than half believed them. These days, there wasn't a soldier in the Crimson Knights who didn't know Death God Olivia. Without stopping to think, Major Mills gave the order to move on, but his aide, Raymond, hurried up to him.

"Major, calm down and think!" Raymond said.

"I'm perfectly calm, thank you very much. Have you forgotten our orders? I can't justify the risk of losing soldiers for no good purpose in a battle with the death god. We all know what happened to Colonel Vollmer."

"Yes, ser, I understand that, but listen—they haven't noticed us at all. Even a death god can't fight off a surprise attack against a force as large as ours. If we kill her, it will be a massive boost to the morale of the entire army. And the greatest share of the glory will be yours, ser."

Glory. The mellifluous echo of the word sang through his ears, and he felt his heart beat faster. Why had he volunteered for this critical mission in the first place? Naturally, to distinguish himself through glorious feats of heroism, and grow his own renown.

Mills looked back at the death god. Raymond was right. She gave no sign of noticing them. Seeing her there, exposed, Mills's ambition tugged at him. As the second son of the House of Bohmenberk, he had no claim on the family lands. He knew that this was the way of the world, but it still rankled that his far inferior older brother would inherit everything simply by luck of being born first. He once entertained the idea of assassinating his brother, but reluctantly set the scheme aside as too risky.

Here on the battlefield was where he had to find glory and make his name. Then one day, when his renown had spread to every corner of the empire, he would make his brother kneel before him. That was Mills's greatest desire in life.

"We won't get such a chance again, ser," Raymond insisted. "Please, make the right decision here."

Mills was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and

beguiling like the whisper of a courtesan.

“You’re right, Raymond. Forget my last order and get the troops ready to charge.” Taking care not to raise a sound, he drew his sword. As soon as word came back that preparations were complete, he took several deep breaths, slowly and deliberately raised his left hand into the air—then brought it down hard.

“Chaaaarge!” he bellowed. The battalion surged forward, seeming to flow down the slope.

A one-eyed man shouted in alarm. “An ambush?!” he cried.

“All of you, fall back!” came Olivia’s panicked command. “There’s too many of them!” The enemy army began to retreat back into the mountains.

Looks like we gave them a real shock, Mills thought. In their hurry to escape, the soldiers had left bags of supplies on the ground, and some had even cast aside their swords. How they intended to protect themselves without swords, he didn’t know. It was almost embarrassing to think that this was the death god and her soldiers who had terrorized the imperial army. Their disorder now was painful to watch. Mills knew victory was within his grasp.

“Even a god of death has to flee when she’s outnumbered!” he shouted, roaring with laughter. “We won’t let her, though! Across the river and after them!”

“Yes, ser!” his soldiers shouted back. They plunged dauntless into the water, sending up great clouds of spray. As he’d thought, the water was shallow, and the riverbed was clearly visible. The river itself was relatively narrow, and wouldn’t hinder their advance.

We’ll be upon them in no time, Mills thought, then immediately realized he had misjudged.

From the river there was a terrified yell. Another panicked soldier called, “My feet are slipping! I can’t sta—!”

The water only came up to their thighs at its deepest point. Yet as Mills watched, he saw one soldier after another swept away around him. He could tell now, as he stood in the water, that if his attention slipped even for a

moment, the river would take him.

He heard Olivia's voice from the far bank. *When did she come back?* He wondered. "Wow, it worked just like you said, Gauss!" She sounded smug as she addressed the one-eyed soldier.

"What did I tell you? The Benum River is deceptively deadly," he replied. "The bottom is coated in algae, so it's easy to lose your footing, and the flow in the center is treacherously swift. Anyone who knows this river well knows you don't try to cross it on foot unless you've got a death wish. When I was a kid, we used to dare each other to go in. I almost drowned more times than I can remember."

"You don't say! But they look kind of like they're having fun, don't they?" Olivia replied. "Hey, what if I went and dipped my toes in? Can I?"

"I have to strongly advise against that, Captain. Given it's *you*, I doubt you'd have any problems, but I don't want Lieutenant Claudia chewing me out afterwards."

"Oh..." Olivia replied. "Well, okay. I won't then. Did you know Claudia turns into a Yaksha sometimes?"

As the two chatted away, archers came dashing down from the hills. There was no trace of the panic and disorder from earlier. Now, they arranged themselves in ordered ranks and raised their bows, ready to fire. At a glance, Mills guessed there must be over a thousand of them. At last, he saw the trap they had set for him.

"Damn...Damn it all!" he bellowed.

From the riverbank, Olivia called out, "It's time, everyone! Do your best, okay?"

"Yes, ser!"

She lowered her arm, and a great mass of arrows came hurtling towards Mills and his soldiers. Immersed in the water and fighting against the rapid current, there was no way for the helpless soldiers to evade. They fell, peppered with arrow shafts. The river water around them turned red with their blood. From

behind him, Mills heard a shrill voice. He turned to see a young soldier holding their helmet. They ran their hands through their hair, looking half mad.

“This humiliating mess is all your fault! You call yourself a Crimson Knight? For shame!” they cried. An older soldier came up and pinned the crazed youth’s arms behind their back, before they were both struck by arrows and swept away downstream.

“Major Mills!” shouted Raymond.

“I hear you,” he said through clenched teeth. “As much as I hate to say it, we need to retreat, then regroup. We can’t fight like this. They’ll massacre us.” A moment later, however, he realized that even this was too optimistic. The riverbank he had come from was now full of royal soldiers.

He saw a woman clad in bright silver armor give a rousing cry. “All units, prepare to shoot!”

“Damn it! They don’t mean to let even one fish escape their net, then?”

This new army must have been concealed in the mist. The realization came to him now that in his obsession with crossing the river, he had let his guard down. But it was too late now to regret what his blind lust for glory had wrought.

Olivia held up a finger and said, with the air of a schoolteacher, “This is what I like to call ‘Stuck between a unicorn and a giant grizzly bear.’”

In response, Mills only growled through gritted teeth.

“Right, so um, how do you want to do this?” Olivia asked. “If you surrender, we won’t kill you.”

“Surrender? *Surrender*?!” Raymond, gasping for breath, had reached the other bank. “The Crimson Knights don’t know the meaning of the word!” he cried. With a furious battle cry he swung his sword at Olivia’s head. She turned slightly to evade the blow, then struck out so fast Mills didn’t even see her blade. Blood spurted from Raymond’s headless torso, before he slowly crumpled to the ground.

“Okay, let’s try that again,” Olivia said, flicking her sword to get the blood off. “If you surrender, we’ll let you live. I want to know where I can find your

supreme commander.”

Mills let out a bark of laughter. No matter what happened now, surrender was out of the question. If he surrendered, he’d never be able to show his face in Rosenmarie’s presence again.

Hell, that’s already true, he thought. *I never thought all my dreams would come to an end like this...* More than half of his battalion were dead. His original mission of carrying out a surprise attack was now totally out of the question. All he could hope for now was to take the death god with him when he died. *I’m not afraid to die. I’d rather die than be looked down on by my wretch of a brother.* He pictured Franz, slovenly and obese. Shaking his head to rid himself of the image, he forced a smile, trying to psych himself up. “Weren’t you listening?” he snarled. “I will never disgrace the honor of the Crimson Knights! We know no surrender!” He reached the bank. Just as Raymond had done, he swung his sword at the crown of Olivia’s head—but it was a feint. He stepped his right foot back, then stabbed forward with all his strength. Olivia didn’t move. At the last moment, just as the tip of his sword reached the breastplate of her armor, she twisted halfway around then struck down at his back with unbelievable force. Mills’s upper half went flying, spewing entrails before coming to rest on the ground.

Olivia sighed, then said, “Look, I’ll ask one more time. Where is your commander? They’re too good at hide-and-seek; I can’t find them *anywhere*.”

“Fool...never...tell you...”

“You’re the commanding officer here, right? So you must know.”

“Captain, he’s not going to be able to answer you in that state,” Gauss said, looking exasperated.

“Oh, true,” she said. “In that case, we might as well kill the rest of these guys. They won’t be any help to us, and we need to find new prey.” Olivia sheathed her sword, then reached for her mini ballista.

“Gauss Osmyer, with you every step of the way, Captain,” Gauss said with a fierce grin. He turned back to the remainder of the Crimson Knights, lazily nocking his next arrow.

“N-No, sto—!”

“Bye-bye!” Without mercy, Olivia sent an arrow shooting through the heart of the last surviving member of the Crimson Knights. The river before them was plugged with red armor and blood. “Isn’t that beautiful?” she said. “It’s like they laid down a red carpet for us.” As the soldiers around her erupted in cheers of victory, Olivia smiled sweetly.

The Third Day of Battle on the Eastern Side of the Carnac Ravine

After their spectacular victory over Mills’s battalion, the Independent Cavalry Regiment went looking for new prey to sink its fangs into. A new target soon presented itself.

“What’s that? You found the death god?” Major General Listenburk, commander of four thousand soldiers, stared wide-eyed at the scout who brought him the news. The death god, according to the reports, had raised her banners and was marching towards the mountain pass just beyond Listenburk’s position. She led a force of around three thousand soldiers.

“You’re sure it’s her?” Listenburk pressed.

“Yes, ser. I saw her with my own eyes—a girl in ebony-black armor at the head of the formation. She had silver hair too. Assuming the other reports were accurate, I’m quite sure it was her,” said the scout confidently.

Listenburk nodded good-naturedly, then said, “Very good. Keep me informed of her movements.”

“Yes, ser!” said the scout, then left.

“What do you think?” Listenburk said, addressing his aide, Hayner, who stood at his side.

“There aren’t a lot of girls in ebony-black armor with silver hair running around,” Hayner replied. “The scout is right. It must be the death god. Who knows what she’ll do if she’s left to her own devices?”

Listenburk folded his arms, thinking through the situation. After a few skirmishes with the Seventh Legion, he no longer believed they were a real

threat. They were well trained and disciplined, but objectively several levels below the martial polish of the Crimson Knights. The death god's unit seemed to be another beast entirely, however. In just two months, they had torn through the empire's forces in the north. They had even brought down Vollmer and his Crimson Knights. Listenburk had to agree with Hayner—leaving them unchecked was far too dangerous.

I know Lady Rosenmarie was looking forward to meeting the death god, but we really can't allow her to take such a risk. After a few victories, Listenburk's soldiers were in high spirits. He also had the advantage of numbers. From a certain point of view, their meeting the death god here might turn out to be a stroke of good luck. They were in an ideal position to challenge her.

"All right," he said. "We're moving out to engage the death god. I swear on my honor as a Crimson Knight, I'll have their heads!"

"Yes, ser!" barked Hayner.

Listenburk's soldiers came to the pass two hours later, and got their first look at the royal army. A stir ran through the ranks, and Listenburk frowned.

They're already in formation? It's almost like they were expecting us... he thought. The point that bothered him most, however, was that the royal soldiers had positioned themselves with their backs to a cliff. It was like they were begging him to charge in and push them off.

"What are they thinking?" Hayner said, echoing Listenburk's own confused thoughts. "Do they want to go plummeting to their deaths? Their commander must be insane."

"Are they trying a burn-your-bridges strategy? The fools. I clearly thought too highly of them," Listenburk said, disgusted. The point of burning your bridges was to force your soldiers to fight on to the last with no hope of surrender. At the end of the day, however, the only advantage it provided was psychological. He had to assume they'd despaired in the face of his superior force. His emotions upon seeing a commander actually utilize such a tactic went beyond shock to utter contempt.

"What are your orders, ser?"

“The obvious. Have the soldiers spread out on both sides, bring the enemy into midrange, then riddle them with arrows. Send the death god and the rest of the rabble into the abyss.”

“Yes ser!” Hayner gave the order, and his soldiers loosed a volley of arrows. In response, the death god’s soldiers raised their shields wrapping the whole force in a layer of steel. The arrows bounced off uselessly. The soldiers moved cleanly and efficiently, almost like they’d seen the attack coming. Listenburk accepted that arrows would do no good against a rock-solid defense like that. Not only that, but the enemy were now shooting their own arrows back through chinks in the shield wall, and his soldiers were falling. He had to change his strategy, or his losses would only grow.

“My lord, we’re not making any progress,” said Hayner.

“I can see that,” Listenburk snapped. “A clever trick they pulled. Transition to attacking with spears. Keep them surrounded on this side. We’ll push them off the edge.”

“Yes, ser!” Hayner shouted another set of orders, and another group of soldiers advanced, spears at the ready.

“They’re doing just what you said they would,” Claudia observed, and Ashton gave her a small smile. Allowing the enemy scouts to find them had worked like a charm to draw the Crimson Knights out. Now, after witnessing the Independent Cavalry Regiment’s impregnable defenses, the Knights had abandoned ranged attacks, and were coming at them with spears. Chances were, they meant to force the Independent Cavalry Regiment back to the edge of the cliff to try and literally push them off.

“Yes, everything’s going according to plan so far. Next, it’s up to you two to cut through their vanguard, just like we discussed.”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” said Claudia, chuckling. “I can’t wait to get out there and show them what we’re made of.”

“I’ll do my best too, Ashton,” said Olivia. Seeing Claudia’s fearless grin and Olivia’s pearly white smile, Ashton couldn’t help but smile back. The person he’d been before could never have smiled in a place like this. It wasn’t just that

he had the other two here beside him. He himself had grown accustomed to battle. Whether that was a good thing or not, he couldn't say. The history of humanity, Ashton thought, could just as soon be called the history of warfare. So long as humans continued to exist, war would never be over. War was what made them human. Swept up in it all, all Ashton could do was try to keep the people close to him alive. He spent every drop of mental energy he had on it.

"Then let's begin," Ashton said. At his order, the soldiers shifted smoothly into a half-cross formation.

"Charge the enemy's center!" Claudia bellowed. The Independent Cavalry Regiment began to charge forward. The Crimson Knights were caught off guard by the sudden assault, but Claudia and Olivia gave the Knights no time to collect themselves. They fought as one, standing back-to-back to cover one another's blind spots as they went whirling through the enemy forces, swords flashing. Every last soldier who stood in their way soon found themselves lying face down in the dirt. Blood sprayed wildly around them as they moved across the battlefield, and the enemy's center began to break.

Escorted by a unit of bodyguards, Ashton gripped his sword and did his best to keep up.

"Now!" Claudia shouted, seeing a point in the enemy formation on the verge of collapse.



Olivia crouched down low, then they were treated to a repeat performance of the move she'd used against the unicorn. A moment later, there was an explosion of blood like a geyser from the Crimson Knights in their way as every one of them dropped. Olivia didn't stop there. She leapt down from its back and cut through the Knights who tried to head her off, moving too quickly for the eye to follow. At last, the enemy's center split apart.

"Ashton!" Olivia called, spinning around. Ashton raised the trumpet in his other hand and blew. With tight efficiency, the Independent Cavalry Regiment shifted into a fan formation. The soldiers on the front line raised their shields in an impassable wall, while those in the back nocked their arrows and waited to shoot.

"Time to move into the final stage! All troops, drive the enemy back!" Claudia cried, her clear voice ringing out across the blood-soaked mountain pass.

The tables had turned. Before they could work out what had happened, Listenburk's soldiers found themselves cornered. Fending off the incessant volleys of enemy arrows, they were driven back towards the edge of the cliff. Listenburk bitterly regretted that they didn't have their enemy's shields. After the brilliant performance he had just witnessed, it finally dawned upon him that he had played right into their hands.

"Damn you all! That first formation was just a ploy, was it? Oh, I bet you're pleased with that bit of cleverness..." he ranted.

"My lord!" Hayner shouted, his voice shrill. "If this goes on, we're going to be pushed over the edge of the cliff!" He kept glancing behind them, as though checking the distance to the edge. Listenburk laughed savagely.

"Let's take a leaf out of their book, then!" he snarled. "Get the soldiers into a half-cross formation and break through their center! Then drive them back to the edge!"

"Right away, ser!" Hayner said. He gave the order, and the Crimson Knights moved into the new formation. It wasn't enough, though.

"Now!" shouted a young man, some kind of officer. "Archers, release the

flaming arrows!” High above Listenburk’s head, a great cloud of burning arrows rose into the air, then came raining down. The soldiers who saw it cried out in alarm.

“My lord!” Hayner gasped. All the blood had gone from his face.

“Hold fast!” Listenburk bellowed, sending spittle flying. “Fire alone is no danger! Keep calm!” The Knights came to their senses, using their shields and swords to bat away the flaming arrows. Listenburk was totally unprepared for what happened next, however. As the arrows landed, the ground beneath his soldiers’ feet burst into roaring flames. It was impossible. Mere flaming arrows couldn’t set the land itself ablaze. Listenburk had lived through hundreds of battles, but he had never seen anything like this.

“It’s burning! How is it burning?!” shrieked Hayner. Listenburk forced down his own panic. Thinking clearly at last, he caught the hint of a pungent odor and understood.

That stench... Ah. They coated the ground with oil. The realization came too late to do him any good, however. After the rash move of grouping all his soldiers together, there was no place for them to run from the fire as it spread. His attempt to use the royal army’s strategy against them had merely led him into a cruel and ingeniously concealed trap. He saw one soldier slowly swallowed up by the blaze, while another, shrouded in flames, staggered right off the edge of the cliff. The pass was now a burning hellscape. The screams of dying soldiers echoed through the mountains.

Listenburk chuckled softly.

“My...My lord?” Hayner said, looking at him uneasily. Listenburk paid him no attention.

“Brilliant,” he said. “Whoever planned this saw through my every move. Enemy or not, you have to acknowledge the brill—” Listenburk never got to finish his compliment. An arrow pierced his throat, bringing his life to an abrupt end.

“My lord!” Hayner cried. He and a number of other soldiers rushed to Listenburk’s side. Another volley of arrows rained down, and they too dropped to the ground, dead.

Claudia gazed out across the sea of flames.

“The Crimson Knights have lost all organization, ser. It’s probably safe to assume that their commander and anyone else important is already dead. We can declare victory.”

Olivia nodded, returning the ballista to her back. “Looks like it,” she said. “Still, don’t relax just yet. A rat in a corner will bite a cat, you know. I’ll squash them first, though.” Almost all the Crimson Knights were dead, having either succumbed to the flames or plunged off the cliff, perhaps seeking the embrace of the river. Those who remained no longer showed any discipline. They either attacked in desperation, or stood paralyzed by indecision, making themselves easy targets.

“But we *still* don’t know where their supreme commander is!” Olivia groaned. The plan had been to take the commander of this unit prisoner and get the information out of them, but it seemed they’d gone and died in the battle. It was unfortunate, but thanks to Ashton’s battle plan, the Independent Cavalry Regiment had come out mostly unscathed. They had reduced the Crimson Knight’s forces, and that alone was a favorable outcome. Olivia knew it was unwise to be greedy. That was as true on the battlefield as it was with tasty food and sweets.

“Captain, we spotted another enemy force on the other side of the pass—” Gauss broke off, looking around at the flaming carnage and unable to find any words. “Things got crazy up here, huh...” That he was here meant the scouts must have returned safely.

“Good job! Thanks,” Olivia said. “Okay, once we’ve killed the rest of them, we’ll have a break and eat something. After that we need to find our next prey. Oh, Ashton!” she said, looking at Ashton. “Can you make me a sandwich? And make sure you put lots of mustard and meat in!”

“Why do I always have to do it?” he grumbled. “I’m bone-tired, I’ll have you know...” He did look exhausted

“Because the food *you* make me, Ashton, just makes me burst with energy!” Olivia said, grinning and flexing her biceps.

“When are you *not* bursting with energy?” Ashton replied, but he was smiling openly. “But you are the commander, after all. I’m not about to disobey an order...”

Claudia watched him, the corners of her mouth twitching.

The atmosphere as they ate was so peaceful it was hard to believe they were in the middle of a war.

When they finished, Olivia said, “We’d better get going, then.” The Independent Cavalry Regiment left the piles of charred corpses and plumes of black smoke that still trailed up into the sky behind, and set off in search of new prey.

III

Crimson Knight Command on the West side of the Carnac Ravine

“What’s the current state of the battle?” Rosenmarie asked, throwing herself into a chair in the command tent.

“We have the advantage at present, my lady,” Guyel replied. He spread a map out on the table and filled Rosenmarie in on the details of the fighting so far. Although the mist had resulted in heavier losses than anticipated, it was all within an acceptable range. The Seventh Legion’s strategy centered around longbow attacks. They were as good as admitting that the Crimson Knights had the upper hand in close combat. Guyel wanted to strike a decisive blow and force an end to it all, but the Seventh Legion’s pet death god threw a wrench in that plan. They couldn’t afford any rash mistakes.

“I get the picture. It’s all pretty much going how we wanted,” said Rosenmarie. “Now, have you found the death god yet?”

Guyel shook his head. “None of our units have been able to locate her.”

“Seriously? She’s still creeping around like a rat out there?” Rosenmarie said. She smiled, but it didn’t reach her crimson eyes. She herself didn’t seem to realize how her obsession with killing the death god radiated from her. As far as Guyel could tell, it wasn’t a dark and brooding sort of obsession. Rather, it was

like the wind, crisp and refreshing. It seemed to invigorate her. This terrified Guyel in a way he couldn't explain, and from that fear a new sense of resolve welled up within him. No matter how many had to die, the death god had to be killed—before Rosenmarie took matters into her own hands. He heard rapid footsteps just as a messenger came dashing into the tent.

"I have a report, ser!" they announced. "We found the body of Major Mills around the middle of the river. Reports say a great number of bodies washed up further downstream. Everything indicates that Major Mills's unit was destroyed."

Faint lines appeared on Rosenmarie's forehead as she turned to Guyel. "That's the unit you sent to attack the Seventh Legion from behind, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lady," he replied. He hadn't expected this. It would impact the rest of his strategy. Guyel sighed, then looked down at the messenger who still kneeled before them. The messenger was staring at him, as though asking permission to say more.

"What?" he demanded. "Was there something else?"

The messenger hesitated, then said, with an air of conviction, "Ser, know that what I say next is merely my own conjecture." Guyel, feeling strangely uneasy, glanced at Rosenmarie. She nodded her approval, and he turned back to the messenger.

"We'll hear it. What's this conjecture of yours?" he said.

"Thank you, ser. According to my sources, Major Mills was found cut in half, along with a number of the other corpses in a similar state. It's hard to believe this was the work of ordinary soldiers."

"Which is to say you think it was the death god," Rosenmarie cut in. The messenger gave a nervous nod. As they did so, another messenger entered the tent, falling heavily to one knee before Rosenmarie.

"My lady!" they cried. "Major General Listenburk is dead! He fell on the Levis Pass. His unit was utterly wiped out!" The dismay felt by other officers in the command tent at this latest piece of bad news was palpable. Unlike Mills, Listenburk was a general—the first general to die in the battle. Processing the

sudden turn for the worse the battle had taken, Guyel's unease expanded rapidly.

"General Listenburk had four thousand soldiers under his command! You can't—" Guyel began, hunting desperately for a way to deny it, but the messenger cut him off.

"They were defeated by the Death God Olivia and her army, a force of three thousand!"

"No..." Guyel said helplessly. He was unable to deceive himself any longer. The significance of what had happened was clear. In the fourth day alone, the death god and her army had wiped out more than a fifth of the Crimson Knights. He felt as though the death god's great scythe, hanging above them, had now come swinging down. A shudder ran through him.

Rosenmarie only laughed darkly. "Death God Olivia..." she hissed. "She's putting on a real show for us now. The slaughter isn't going to end, not until I go out myself." She took the water flask a servant offered her, drained it in a single gulp, then banged it down on the table. Her crimson eyes gleamed like those of a predatory beast eyeing its prey.

Guyel, seeing all his fears made real before him, began to panic. "My lady, please reconsider!" he cried.

"What's there to reconsider?" Rosenmarie retorted. "Do you have another idea for how to stop her?" She finished with a derisive snort.

"I have a plan, my lady! A good one!" Guyel said, rushing to explain.

First, they would gather up their scattered forces. Then they would surround the death god and her army with ten thousand soldiers, wearing them down with successive waves of attacks. However formidable, she still only had three thousand soldiers. In war, it all came down to numbers in the end. The simplicity of a strategy that relied purely on that fact would make it almost impossible to counter.

Rosenmarie listened in silence, and Guyel saw a flicker of uncertainty on her face.

"That's hardly a plan," she said. "You want to send more than half our force to

attack the death god? Let's say we do just that. The rest of the Seventh Legion isn't just here for show. While all our attention is focused on the death god they'll probably come and strike at me directly. That's what *I'd* do if I were them."

"You're right, my lady, I can't rule that out," Guyel admitted. "But if we are to weigh the death god's army against the rest of the Seventh Legion, the death god is surely the greater threat. If we can only kill her, we can mop up the rest later."

Guyel didn't mean to make light of the Seventh Legion. He simply genuinely didn't believe that they posed a threat to the Crimson Knights, and all the reports he'd heard had only confirmed his opinion. He calculated that even if the Seventh Legion sent a massive force to mount a surprise attack, if the Crimson Knights closed their defenses and held their ground it should be possible to hold them at bay. If they could only kill the death god, the Crimson Knights could turn around and catch the Seventh Legion in a pincer strike. He heard the other officers expressing their agreement. Now, he just needed Rosenmarie to change her mind.

"No," she said shortly. "Your suggestion is rejected." Guyel knew he couldn't just back down here, though. Rosenmarie's life was at stake.

"Why, my lady? At least give me a reason."

"Why...?" she echoed. "Fine, let's go through it then. It'll take time to gather together our forces. Do you think the death god is going to sit quietly in the meantime? We'll just be giving her time to continue picking off our units with this divide-and-conquer plan. Above all, the ravine is too narrow to move ten thousand soldiers around in. The reason we chose this area is because our soldiers' experience with mountainous terrain makes it best suited to their skills. That's also why we broke them up into smaller units that can coordinate attacks. Now, Guyel, you're asking me to take away their edge."

"But my lady, we've seen that the divide-and-conquer strategy is working. And there *are* places within the ravine that can accommodate a force of ten thousand."

"That's true," Rosenmarie said, but her smile was mocking. "How do you plan

to get the death god there? Offer her sweets?” Guyel countered, suggesting that they send a unit in as bait—the very strategy that had led to the empire’s crushing defeat back at the Battle of Berkel. The scale was much smaller this time, but the circumstances were otherwise fundamentally identical.

Rosenmarie made an approving noise. “Not bad. Except that it requires the death god to be a total moron.”

“What do you mean?”

Rosenmarie smiled like she’d been waiting for him to ask. “Forgotten already, Guyel? This girl neutralized *thirty thousand* of our soldiers. In other words, she’s not going to fall for your trap.” She ran her slender fingers softly down his cheek. Guyel groaned in frustration, and she patted him lightly on the back as though comforting a child.

“Don’t look so pathetic, Guyel. I won’t stand for it from my own aide,” she said, laughing. “The death god won’t fall for your trap, but I haven’t ruled out your plan just yet.”

“You... You mean...?” Guyel said, leaning forward eagerly before he could help himself. Rosenmarie held up a hand and he fell back.

“We’ll use your plan as a base. I’ll add the finishing touches.”

“Finishing... My lady, what are you planning?” Guyel demanded. Rosenmarie only smirked. She wanted him to guess. Guyel wracked his brains, but failing to alight on any obvious answer he shook his head, admitting surrender. Rosenmarie’s smile grew wider. She leaned forward so that her lips almost brushed Guyel’s ear.

“Don’t you see? The bait we use to lure the death god into our trap will be *me*.”

“You’re not going to tell me where your commander is either? You know if you do, we’ll let you live,” Olivia said. “Oh, and I’ll give you a cookie! Just one, though.”

“Die in hell!” the man in front of her roared, his face twisting in anger as he swung his sword at her. Olivia caught the blade between her fingers just before

it reached her throat, and the man's blue eyes bulged in shock. Olivia, unfazed by this interruption, held the edge of her sword up to the man's neck.

"Let's try that again. Please tell me where your commander is?" When the man was silent, she added, "I'll let you live, and I really will give you a cookie— Oh! Are you worried about your teeth rotting? Don't worry, they won't really rot."

The man still didn't answer.

"Oh, well. Okay then," Olivia said. She adjusted her grip, then slashed her blade across the man's neck. A burst of bright red blood splattered across her face.

"Major, we've cleaned up the last of them," Claudia said, then saw the man's head on the ground. "I see this one didn't give the location up either," she remarked, handing Olivia a handkerchief. Olivia thanked her, before beginning to scrub at the blood on her face.

"No, he wouldn't say *anything* at the end. I don't get why they're all in such a hurry to die."

"They're soldiers to the bone, and soldiers stay loyal," Claudia replied with an approving nod. "It's admirable, even in an enemy."

"But they'll never eat tasty food or sweets ever again..." Olivia said. "That's a big no from me." Claudia watched with a bittersweet smile as Olivia cleaned the blood off her blade and returned it to its scabbard.

"That, ser," she said, "is what it means to be loyal," There was a hint of pride in her voice. Olivia, meanwhile, wasn't convinced that loyalty was as important as all that. She didn't get it at all. There was still a lot about humans she needed to learn. Claudia, however, obviously valued it highly.

I know one thing, though, she thought. If Claudia goes and dies for the sake of "loyalty," I'll kill it. I swear, I'll kill it dead on the spot. Olivia's hands curled tightly into fists.

Just then, a familiar voice echoed out. "Olivia, orders came from the lord commander. He wants us to return to command," Ashton called, waving as he walked over. Olivia narrowed her eyes at him.

No, I don't need to worry about Ashton, she thought. He's not about to start talking about dying for loyalty.

"Huh?" Ashton said, touching his cheek nervously. "Is there something on my face?"

Olivia smiled at him. "Oh, no, there's nothing. What's that about calling us back? Did something bad happen?"

"Not sure. Though from what the messenger told me, the battle's been going poorly for the rest of the Seventh Legion," replied Ashton. "We'd better head off as soon as we're ready. Get some rest, okay?" He then turned to Claudia. "Lieutenant, might I have a word about our plans from here on out?" He pulled out a map, and the two of them walked away, deep in discussion.

Why does my chest get all warm when I look at those two? It's so strange. I feel like I just ate a bowl of hot soup, Olivia thought. The sensation mystified her. In all the years she spent living with Z, she had never felt anything like this warmth. Perhaps if she stayed with Ashton and Claudia, one day she could solve this latest mystery.

With her mind still on this, she ran over and dived on the other two, then squeezed herself in between them. While they looked at her in surprise, Olivia linked her arms into theirs, locking them in her viselike grip. The smile she gave them was innocence itself.

Seventh Legion Command, the Carnac Ravine

The Independent Cavalry Regiment returned to command, as Paul ordered. As though he had been waiting for them, Olivia and the others had barely set foot in the camp when they were summoned to a war council.

"I summoned you back here urgently for one reason. We've had word of major activity within the enemy army. Colonel Otto will explain."

"Yes, ser," Otto barked, standing up before turning to the ranks of officers. He informed them that what appeared to be the Crimson Knights' main force had reassembled downriver. Their commander was protected by a mere three thousand soldiers. According to the Seventh Legion's scouts, there was no trace

in the vicinity of the other units that ought to have been there protecting the camp.

“They’ve chosen a particularly wide-open section of the ravine here,” said one of the Seventh Legion’s older veteran officers. “The Crimson Knights are at their best fighting in the mountains—that’s how they’ve been overpowering us so far. But now they’ve thrown away that advantage? It’s madness. And to leave their command exposed with a mere three thousand soldiers...” He shook his head. “I just don’t understand it.” The other officers nodded in agreement. Only Ashton didn’t react. He was staring at the battle map on the table, deep in thought. Olivia, meanwhile, had a brand-new bit of cloth out and was using it to polish her armor. She seemed very pleased with the ebony plate. Otto kept shooting frosty glances her way, and every time he did so Claudia would hiss at Olivia to pay attention. Olivia would obediently look up, but soon enough she returned to her polishing. This cycle had been playing on repeat for a while.

“It’s a puzzle, no doubt about it, but might this not be the chance we’ve been waiting for?” pointed out one officer.

“Just so,” agreed another. “If we can catch them unawares, we could take out their commander. Lord Paul, we should march out right away.”

“I think so too,” said a third, as the other officers all murmured in agreement. It had been a hard battle, and many of them were happy for any way out. The whole room seemed to be leaning towards a surprise attack on the enemy command. Paul listened, stroking his chin, then without warning, he turned to Ashton.

“Warrant Officer Ashton, what do you think? I want your honest opinion.”

“Y-Yes, ser...” Ashton answered. “I think we can safely say that this is a trap. We definitely shouldn’t just march in there.”

“Oh?” said Paul. “And what makes you so sure?” Ashton took the black piece representing the enemy command, and placed it on the battle map. All eyes around the room were fixed on him. He had contradicted everyone else in the room, but not one officer raised their voice in dissent. It was hard to argue with Ashton’s record. Even Osmund, who had been so quick to mock him last time, was quiet as a mouse. There was something like shame in his eyes as he hung

on Ashton's every word.

"Why are they suddenly trying to appear totally defenseless?" Ashton began. "At a glance, it might look like the perfect opportunity to strike at their command, but the moment we do so is when the trap will snap shut." He placed a number of new black pieces on the map in a ring around the first. "Their forces will be lying in wait for us at a distance. That's why our scouts didn't spot them in the vicinity of the enemy command. When we march in..." He put a white piece on the map next to the enemy command, then slid the surrounding black pieces in one after another. "...the waiting soldiers will swoop down on us. We'll be surrounded and wiped out in moments. I'd wager that these other units are all around an hour's march away." His explanation complete, Ashton saluted, then sat back down. The officer's voices, almost moans, filled the room.

Paul, looking crestfallen, said, "You're telling me their commander is betting that even if we send in our whole army, they can hold us at bay for a whole hour?"

"They must think very little of us," Otto remarked dryly before Ashton could reply. If Ashton was right, then Claudia had to agree with Otto. The Crimson Knights, however, had shown just how far they towered over the Seventh Legion. It wasn't a gap that could be bridged overnight.

"I think exactly that, Lord Paul," Ashton said. "The force currently stationed around the enemy command is likely made up of their most elite warriors."

"I see what you're saying, Warrant Officer," a young officer piped up. "But why now? The Crimson Knights have been beating us across the board since the fighting began. Why switch to such a risky ploy?" He voiced the question everyone in the room had been thinking, Claudia included. The Seventh Legion was reduced to less than twenty thousand soldiers—at this point, The Crimson Knights didn't need to resort to tricks to hold on to their advantage. Even considering the Independent Cavalry Regiment's smaller victories, it was obvious that the Seventh Legion was losing.

"Oh, well, that'll be because of the Independent Cavalry Regiment." A voice like a tinkling bell came from beside Claudia, cutting through her thoughts,

“They’re getting fed up with us. It turns out we actually killed a major general at some point.” Olivia, still polishing her armor, sounded cheerful. “Anyway, I think they probably just want to crush us and be done with it. Hammer down the nail that sticks out, you know?” Osmund, perhaps reacting to the words “major general,” visibly shuddered. Ashton scratched his head with an embarrassed smile.

“Yes, just as the major says,” he continued, “it appears our enemy sees the Independent Cavalry Regiment as a far greater threat than we anticipated. The Crimson Knights likely set this trap specifically for us.” There was a buzzing murmur from the other officers, but Paul nodded.

“So that’s it,” he said, sounding convinced. “The Independent Cavalry Regiment does stand head and shoulders above the rest of the Seventh Legion, no mistake. I know it, so it’s only natural the enemy commander recognizes the threat too. Warrant Officer Ashton, everything you say makes sense to me. Colonel Otto?”

“Yes, ser,” Otto said. “There are any number of ways we can counter such a plan. The important thing is that we appear to fall into their trap, while in fact setting one of our own.” His face broke into a rare, fearsome smile.

“Good. Colonel, you and Warrant Officer Ashton go and work out our plan. Waste no time. When you’re done, we move out.”

“Yes, ser!”

“Y-Yes, ser!”

Ashton’s really grown into this... thought Claudia. *It wasn’t long ago that he was stammering and trembling, but it seems that’s all under control now. Well, mostly...* As she watched Ashton salute, his eyes glazed over like a dead fish, it was all she could do to keep from laughing.

Crimson Knight Command

“You played us yet again, did you? I’m never living *this* one down,” Rosenmarie said with an ironic smile as she gazed out at the wall of flames that blazed in the distance. The plan had been working. The Seventh Legion had

shown up with barely ten thousand soldiers, far fewer than Rosenmarie had expected, and a number her forces could easily hold off for an hour. No sooner had the battle begun, however, than the plan went astray. The ring of flames had sprung up, changing everything. Now, when their forces lying in wait returned, the fire would prevent them from joining the battle. Short of a sudden downpour, the fire would go right on burning. It was a brilliant tactic, and it made it clear that the Seventh Legion had seen right through Guyel's trap. First rendering half the imperial army useless and now this—Rosenmarie couldn't help but be impressed by their tactician.

"It's pretty daring, right? I mean, if we stay here too long, we'll be burnt up right along with you!" Standing before the lake of blood that pooled around Rosenmarie's personal guard, the girl giggled, then did a graceful twirl on tiptoes. She might as well have been dancing at a ball.

"Death God Olivia..." Rosenmarie said. "Enjoying your little game?"

The girl had long, glossy silver hair that reached all the way down her back. Her skin was white as porcelain, and her features were so perfect and delicate she appeared almost doll-like. Her ebony armor bore a crest that could only be meant to symbolize death. Then there was the *pièce de résistance*. An ebony blade, wrapped in dark mist. She was, in short, the spitting image of all the stories. In case there'd been any doubt, however, Rosenmarie was also fairly sure that there weren't many teenage girls out there who could make the murder of her entire personal guard look like child's play.

"That's right," Olivia replied. "Though I'm not actually a god of death. You're the commander, right? I feel like I've been waiting to meet you for *ages*. Did you get my message?"

Rosenmarie smiled widely. "I *did*. It was wonderful. It's why I invited you here—though I admit I wasn't planning to host you quite like this. I suppose you're going to kill me now?"

"Yep, that's the plan," Olivia replied promptly, smiling from ear to ear. Rosenmarie found the directness refreshing. Smiling wider still, she reflected that the heavens had sent her a worthy opponent at last.

"In a way, our goals are one and the same," she said. "I think we're going to

get on well.” She reached up to release the clasps that held her cloak at her shoulders, then slowly drew her sword. Though silver at first, the steel began to glow with heat, turning steadily scarlet. Olivia put her hand on the hilt of her sword, then drew it once more.

“You’re right, I think we *will* get along,” she said. “Hey, mind telling me your name?”

“Why not? It’ll make a good souvenir for you to take to the land of the dead. My name is Rosenmarie von Berlietta. One woman to another, I hope we’ll be friends.”

“Rosenmarie von Berlietta. That’s such a nice name. I’m Olivia Valedstorm. Looking forward to getting to know you.”

Olivia and Rosenmarie exchanged a smile; then they both sprang forward. Their swords clashed with the earsplitting screech of steel against steel.

IV

The battle between Olivia and Rosenmarie began.

Their swords clashed together over and over, until Olivia struck down with a diagonal slash. Rosenmarie twisted to avoid the blade, simultaneously throwing a powerful kick at Olivia’s stomach. Olivia stepped back swiftly, sending up a cloud of dust as she responded in kind with a kick of her own. Their legs slammed together in midair. Both stopped for a moment, then leapt back, putting distance between them.

So this is who I’m dealing with, Rosenmarie thought. *I guess she did say she was going to kill me. It’s not just her skill with a blade—she can go hand-to-hand too. I can see how she took out Vollmer now.* After exchanging a few blows, Rosenmarie’s blade still hadn’t even come close to striking Olivia. She was running through her next moves in her mind, planning out her strategy, when Olivia called over to her.

“You’ve got lots of odh too, Rosenmarie! Way more than that Vollmer guy I killed the other day,” she said, sounding delighted. “Z told me people like you are really rare, but there are actually quite a few around, huh? Or maybe I’m

just lucky!” She finished on a thoughtful note, then sank lower into her stance.

Lots of odh...? Rosenmarie ran the word over in her mind. She had the feeling she’d heard it somewhere before. But it looked like any questions she had would have to wait. Olivia’s body language made it obvious she was preparing to move. Rosenmarie raised her sword—

Where’d she come from?! Without anything discernible giving away her plan of attack, Olivia closed the gap between them, her blade a blur as it stabbed out at Rosenmarie’s face. Rosenmarie used the middle of her blade to fend Olivia off, linking the parry into a downward blow at her head. Olivia turned to one side to evade her, then rotated fully around to bring her sword cleaving around from the left. Rosenmarie immediately shifted her sword to her other hand then thrust it down to interrupt the trajectory of the blow, throwing up a shower of sparks and an earsplitting screech.

Rosenmarie exhaled. “Close one,” she said. “I see why everyone was so scared of the God of Death. That’s an impressive move.”

“You too, Rosenmarie,” Olivia replied. “This reminds me of training with Z!” A barely perceptible wistful look flickered across her face. Rosenmarie saw an opening there and struck, but Olivia was ready—she dodged, and Rosenmarie’s sword went slicing through an unfortunate tree instead. With a creaking groan, it toppled over. A flock of birds burst out of the canopy, shrieking in panic, followed by an almighty thud as the trunk hit the ground. Then the fresh stump burst into flames.

“Huh?” Olivia gaped at the burning tree. Then her eyes turned to Rosenmarie’s sword.

Rosenmarie chuckled. “I think I managed to surprise you!”

“Yeah,” Olivia replied. “That’s a really interesting sword you’ve got.”

Rosenmarie couldn’t help but laugh at the longing in her eyes. “You’ve already got your own interesting sword,” she said. “I assume now you see what’ll happen when I cut you?”

“I’ll catch fire too, you mean? Mm, no thanks,” said Olivia, not sounding especially concerned. “That looks really, really hot.” She gave Rosenmarie a

friendly smile.

“I haven’t gotten to cut a person with this mage-enchanted sword yet, and I can’t *wait* to see how well you burn.”

“Mage-enchanted sword?” Olivia said, cocking her head. “I feel like I remember hearing about mages. Do they use magic too?”

“Magic?” It was Rosenmarie’s turn to look confused. She thought that that much would be obvious, but Olivia sounded as though she spoke of something different. Meanwhile, Olivia frowned, wondering why Z had never taught her about “mages.”

Unlike Felix, Rosenmarie didn’t involve herself with mages. The inscrutable nature of their powers meant she’d always kept her distance. It just didn’t make sense to her that mere humans were able to wield what was supposed to be divine power, though if she said that in front of anyone from the Illuminatus Church, they’d probably blow their top.

At the end of the day, Rosenmarie just used whatever tools she had available to her.

“Well, whatever,” she said. “I don’t really care how it works.” Then she lunged forward as though she meant to swing at Olivia, lightning-fast. Her actual strike, though, was so slow a child could have dodged it. That was Rosenmarie’s fighting style—weaving together swift and slow strikes, and along with her signature footwork, she appeared to relax and let down her defenses just enough to throw her opponent off guard. Most opponents lost their flow and, unable to recover, ended up face down in the dirt.

Not Olivia, though. She dodged and parried everything Rosenmarie threw at her, adding counterstrikes of her own. Rosenmarie swung low, trying to cut Olivia’s legs out from under her, but her blade met nothing as Olivia flipped through the air and landed lightly back on the ground. She moved seamlessly, as though her heavy armor weighed nothing.

Rosenmarie whistled. “Are you hiding wings back there or something?” she said. “Even if you are, I can’t believe you just brushed off my best swordplay like that... At this rate, I’ll lose *my* flow.”

“You’re really tough,” Olivia admitted. “Apart from Z, no one’s held off my attacks this long before.”

“You keep talking about this ‘Z,’ but who *is* this guy? Your master?”

Olivia was a teenage girl with unbelievable fighting ability. It wasn’t crazy to think there could be a genius swordsman out there who’d trained her, but it would be more shocking if such a person didn’t exist, really. Unless, of course, they actually *were* a god of death.

“Master? Is Z my master...?” Olivia said, considering. “No, I don’t think that’s quite right. Huh. I wonder what I am to Z?”

“How the hell should I know?!” Rosenmarie snapped back without thinking. Olivia cackled, clutching her stomach.

“Good point,” she admitted, then cocked her head and twirled her sword, “By the way,” she added, “I’ve been wondering about your sword technique this whole time. I’m sure I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

From the time she was a child, Osvannes had taught Rosenmarie the basics of her bladework. She had since developed her own personal style, but the fundamentals remained the same. Olivia was essentially saying she saw the echo of Osvannes’s technique in her. Rosenmarie felt a chill crawl up her spine.

“It can’t be...” she hissed. “It was *you*? You killed General Osvannes?” As soon as the words left her mouth, it all made sense. He might have been old, but none of the other Seventh Legion rabble would have stood a chance against Osvannes.

“General Osvannes...” Olivia said, trying to remember. Then she snapped her fingers and said cheerfully, “Yes, that’s it! You fight just like Mr. Osvannes!”

“Answer the question!” Rosenmarie shouted.

“Oh, um, yes, I was the one who killed him,” Olivia said lightly. Rosenmarie felt something inside her snap.

“Olivia...” she began, “Starting now, I’m going to cut another piece off of you every five minutes until you die.” Her voice grew louder as she went on, until she was shouting. “I’m going to make sure you suffer before you die!”

“Oh? Weren’t we going to be friends?” Olivia replied, but Rosenmarie wasn’t listening. Baring her teeth, she lunged at Olivia with the force of an oncoming storm. With Osvannes’s murderer here, right in front of her, she could no longer hold her rage at bay. Olivia deftly parried all her strikes, still smiling all the while, but it no longer reached her ebony eyes. Now instead they glimmered like those of a wild beast teasing its prey.

“Hey now,” Olivia said teasingly. “Your technique’s gotten sloppy all of a sudden. What’s the matter?”

“Shut up!” Rosenmarie bellowed, the mockery only fueling her anger. At the same time, however, she could tell something was wrong. Every time Olivia parried her strikes, numbness crept a little further up her arms. Olivia’s attacks were getting more powerful. It was like trying to cut through a lump of iron, and a sense of futility threatened to overwhelm her.

“Damn it!” she yelled, jumping back out of Olivia’s range, then roughly swiped at the sweat that streamed down her forehead. Olivia, as though to show she wasn’t worried, didn’t close in on her. Arvin’s warning flashed through Rosenmarie’s mind.

The shimmers really do know how to analyze a fight. She’s got more endurance than me, to say nothing of her strength... I can’t let this drag on or I’m screwed. Time to get myself under control. Right now I need to be thinking clearly. She took a few deep breaths, then she ran at Olivia at full speed. She focused her mind with razor-sharp intensity, ready to read and react to blows from above, striking down on the diagonal, sweeping around from the side, stabbing forward... Whatever happened, she would counter it. Olivia, however, struck in a way she never saw coming.

A flying blade strike?! Rosenmarie thought as Olivia planted her left foot and her arm swung around, curving like a whip as she *threw* the ebony blade. There was a roar like a hurricane as the sword hurtled towards Rosenmarie, but she twisted to one side to make herself less of a target, and the blade missed her by a hair’s breadth.

That was too close. There was literally a hair between me and it, she thought. She let out a breath of relief, but as she did so—

“Your guard’s down.”

“Eh—?!” she cried out. Olivia appeared in front of her, already halfway through a kick that tore Rosenmarie’s sword from her hands, then with perfect flow she drove through with her drawn-back fist. Rosenmarie immediately crossed her arms in front of her to defend her torso, but this did nothing to impede Olivia’s blow. There was a thud that shook Rosenmarie’s skull. Her arms bent away at unnatural angles, and Olivia drove into her chest. The impact rippled through her a moment later, so powerful it felt like it would tear right through her. Even her armor did nothing to dull the force.

“Ngh!” Unable to endure any further, she fell to her knees. Another kick smashed into her chin. Her vision flickered as she collapsed onto her back. Olivia placed her foot on Rosenmarie’s chest and pushed down, hard.



“Damn... Damn you!” Rosenmarie yelled.

Olivia giggled. “You’re pretty lively for someone with two broken arms,” she said. “That’ll be thanks to your odh. I think it’s about time to wrap this up, though, don’t you?” She smiled brightly and continued, “I’d like to thank you, Rosenmarie von Berlietta. I get to send Z another tasty meal.” Rosenmarie’s armor made a painful groaning noise, but Rosenmarie herself could do nothing but glare up at Olivia. Just then, she felt the ground rumble with the footsteps of a large group of people.

A voice she knew well called out, “My lady! We’re here to save you!” Rosenmarie tilted her head in the direction of the voice and saw Guyel and his unit with their bows drawn and beginning to shoot. Olivia swiftly retreated, dancing left and right to avoid the arrows.

“I’m so sorry it took us this long, my lady,” Guyel said, rushing to her side.

“Guyel...” Rosenmarie croaked. “You...you’re alive...”

“Yes, my lady. I’m too stubborn to die just yet,” Guyel said with a half-smile, lifting Rosenmarie up gently in his arms. As he did so, pain lanced through her body, but she managed to endure it, though she had to grit her teeth so hard she thought they might crack.

“What of the others?” she asked.

“Forgive me, my lady. I was unable to save the unit assigned to your defense. They were wiped out. But so long as *you* live, there is yet hope.” He slung Rosenmarie across his shoulders, then shouted to the rest of his soldiers, “I don’t want the death god getting anywhere near us, you hear me?” He finished his orders, then said to Rosenmarie, “We’re retreating, my lady. I know you must be in pain, but please hold on a little longer.”

“N...No!” Rosenmarie cried. “She’s... Osvannes’s killer is...!” They couldn’t retreat. Not while her most hated enemy was right here.

“We’ve lost!” Guyel retorted, then added, “Besides, my lady, how do you intend to fight in that state? I hate this as much as you do, but please, be reasonable.”

Rosenmarie could hear the steel in his words. He was right, and in the end, she couldn't find the words to contradict him. Forcing down her rage as it tried to overwhelm her again, she finally said, "We retreat."

Guyel only nodded, and they began to make their way towards the forest...

"Now hold on just a minute! I can't have you escaping on me!" Olivia said. She felt a bit like she was part of a comedy skit as she chimed in in the middle of the other two's conversation. At this rate, Rosenmarie was actually going to get away. She tried to chase after them, but the Crimson Knights moved in to block her path. There were around thirty of them, and their eyes told her, as they raised their weapons, that every one of them knew they would die here. Humans were hardest to kill when they got like this—willing to die before they backed down.

Olivia sighed deeply, then murmured, "This might have been a mistake..."

Chapter Seven: After the Battle Was Won

I

Kier Fortress, Base of Imperial Military Operations in Fernest

After General Felix received the news of the Crimson Knights' defeat, he set off from>Listelein Castle to see Marshal Gladden at Kier Fortress.

"Sorry for making you come all this way," Gladden welcomed him.

"Not at all, ser," Felix replied. Gladden gestured for him to sit down on the sofa, so he did so. An attendant smoothly placed a teacup on the table before him. It appeared to be Hausen tea, a variety of tea cultivated in the Asvelt Empire, and one to which Felix was particularly partial. It was one of the empire's most important luxury exports and was always in high demand in other nations. Felix took the cup with a word of thanks, accidentally making eye contact with the attendant. Her face colored as she saluted, then rushed from the room. Felix, unsure what to make of this, looked doubtfully after her.

Gladden, watching him with mild amazement, asked, "How old are you, Felix?"

"Twenty-one this year..." Felix replied. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Twenty-one already..." Gladden mused. "You're of an age to be getting married, then. A word from you and you'd have every young lady of high birth in the empire lining up to ask for your hand, and yet I'm yet to hear any good news on that front." He paused, looking at Felix probingly, then stroked his chin. "Or have you secretly promised yourself to someone?"

Felix gaped at him. "I'm sorry, what are we talking about?" he asked, feeling a little unmoored by the sudden discussion of his marriage prospects.

Gladden only shook his head with a sigh. "Never mind," he said. "Just think of it as an old man's teasing. Let's get back to Rosenmarie. I heard she was badly

injured, but what's her actual condition?"

"The healer says she'll live, but it will be a long time before she fully recovers," Felix replied. According to the healer, in addition to her two broken arms, Rosenmarie had also suffered extensive damage to her internal organs. If the damage had been any more severe, she would certainly have died.

"Thank goodness..." Gladden said, nodding with relief and sinking back into the sofa. Gladden would never admit it, but Felix knew he cared about Rosenmarie in his own way.

"After this, though, I think we'll have to shelve our plans to conquer the north," Felix continued. Rosenmarie's army had fallen all the way back to the northern border, basing themselves out of an outland castle, Fort Astora. Rosenmarie's aide Guyel was standing in as supreme commander in her absence.

"No helping that. No one can replace the Crimson Knights..." Gladden said. He paused, then asked, "Is it all really true, then? Halfway through this, I started feeling like I was reading a fantasy story." He looked over to the pile of papers on his desk—Guyel's report on the Battle of Carnac. The report went through the circumstances leading to the battle in detail, and everything they knew about Death God Olivia.

"Colonel Guyel is an exceptional soldier. Having read his report myself, I believe it to be a plain statement of fact," Felix replied

"He'd have to be to serve under that shrew of a commander. I know his character as well as you, I just..." Gladden paused, searching for the right words. "I just have to wonder if this Death God Olivia can really be that powerful. In his report he describes her as a teenage girl."

Guyel's report was more or less just an account of how Olivia and her forces had toyed with the Crimson Knights. He described Olivia in particular as practically superhuman. Although the girl was just one soldier, Olivia was enough to freeze the blood of any imperial soldier. When Felix looked at her through their enemy's eyes, however, she seemed akin to the heroes and conquerors of yore, or perhaps even greater. Gladden was right that it sounded like fantasy, but Felix knew with absolute and unwavering certainty that it was

all true. He remembered when he first laid eyes on Olivia at the ceremony to approve the exchange of hostages. Ever since that day, he had, deep in his heart, dreaded that things would come to this.

Olivia's figure was still vividly etched in his memory, and he pictured her as he thought, *Even with Rosenmarie's odh, this girl still wiped the floor with her. I can scarcely imagine how powerful she must be. And let's not forget that she neutralized thirty thousand of our soldiers, or how she saw right through Rosenmarie's cunning. It beggars belief. Is strategy another of this girl's talents, or was there someone else behind it...? Whichever it is, she's still the greatest thorn in the empire's side right now.*

Seeing that Gladden still looked disbelieving, he said, "My lord marshal, the result of this last battle should tell you all you need to know. Our next move must be made in consideration of the facts we have."

Gladden nodded, his expression resolute. "I agree. Come to think of it, that fort we left to the Swarans—Fort Peshitta—was lost because of the death god's interference too. You're absolutely right. To ignore reality would be the height of foolishness. On which note," he continued, "did Chancellor Darmés have anything to say about this?"

"He told me that we were to hold our current position in the north, and that he was leaving the rest to the two of us."

"The lord chancellor wants to wait and see, does he?" Gladden said, his lip curling as he went on sarcastically, "Well, I hope neither hell nor high waters come calling in the meantime..." Darmés might be second only to the emperor himself in terms of power, but he had risen up out of the analytics department, and he was a dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat. Forget an army, the man had never so much as commanded a single private. Felix could only imagine how fed up Gladden, whose position as leader of the Three Generals put him at the pinnacle of the imperial army, must have been with Darmés sticking his nose into military affairs—chancellor or not.

"However," Felix went on, "he also told me that the Azure Knights must stay where they are. Not that I would have dreamed of mobilizing without the permission of His Imperial Majesty, of course."

Gladden smiled wryly. “That’s to be expected. The Azure Knights are needed for the defense of the capital.”

“Forgive me, ser.”

“No need for you to apologize, Felix,” Gladden said. “Though that does mean I’ll have to take center stage in the next act...” Gladden rubbed his chin again, then reached for his cup of black tea, now stone cold. Felix took another few sips of his hausen tea, and for a time the two sat without saying a word.

Finally, Gladden broke the silence. “Felix, until Rosenmarie is fully recovered, I want you to look after the Crimson Knights. I doubt the Seventh Legion plans on making a foray into the empire’s lands, but better to be safe than sorry, eh?”

“I have no objections myself, ser. It’s just...” Felix paused, looking for the right words. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? The Azure Knights might be locked down, but I can always ride out with my usual unit if need be.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. This is a good opportunity for us all to get serious about this war. Our forces still have the advantage; that hasn’t changed, but it won’t do to let the royal army get too carried away. The news of the Crimson Knights’ defeat must have spread around Duvedirica by now.”

“You think there’s a chance that the vassal states will hear about this defeat and start getting funny ideas, ser?” Felix guessed. Gladden grimaced slightly.

“That’s exactly what I think. Swaran is one thing, but the Stonian army still haven’t taken any losses. As a warning to them all, allow my Helios Knights and I to handle this.” He picked up his cup and downed the remaining tea in a single gulp.

The Royal Army at Windsome Castle

Although they had suffered devastating losses, the Seventh Legion emerged victorious from their battle with the Crimson Knights. Paul assigned a unit of eight thousand soldiers, with the Independent Cavalry Regiment at its core, to the task of chasing down any remaining enemies. He then rode back to Windsome Castle, arriving to a hail of cheers from the liberated citizens.

Three days later, Paul looked down on a man dressed in fine robes who knelt before him.

“If you want to explain yourself, I’m listening,” Paul said coldly, his voice echoing in the stillness of the audience chamber. A tremor ran through the kneeling man’s shoulders, and he looked up with fear in his eyes. The man’s name was Count Konrad Windsome, lord of the Zaltz region and former master of Windsome Castle.

“Forgive me, your grace. I swear, I only submitted to the empire in order to fulfill my duty to protect my people!”

“You’re telling me you didn’t want any of this, then, Count?”

“Of course not, Your Grace! I surrendered the castle first only because I wished to ensure that the people came to no harm! I would never have handed over the castle of my most glorious ancestor Tristan Windsome were it not of the gravest necessity!” Once he got going, Konrad proved to be quite verbose. He went on, ardently impressing upon Paul how he had devoted himself to the protection of his people even as he suffered under imperial persecution. The soldiers standing guard along the walls of the chamber wore expressions of utter contempt, but he didn’t seem to notice. Paul listened to the whole speech, then turned to Otto who waited at his side. Otto nodded, then placed a tray before Konrad. On it rested a letter written on parchment.

“Wh...What is this?” Konrad asked, bewildered.

“This was delivered to me by a representative of your people,” said Paul. “I suggest you take a look at the contents yourself.” Konrad’s reaction was comically dramatic. He fumbled in his haste to open the letter, then unfolded it violently and began to read like a starving man given food. Everyone watched as, little by little, the blood drained from his face.

“Your Grace, I—” Konrad began, but Paul cut his excuses off with a wave.

“Finished? Good. These people you say you *devoted yourself* to protecting seem to hate you with an intensity that borders on the fanatical. Now, if my eyes didn’t deceive me, it says there that a great number of innocents were killed on *your* orders, Count. I can hardly believe you’re both referring to the same events.”

“Th-That’s not what happened!” cried Konrad. “These people, they don’t understand! It was orders from the empire! I had no choice!”

“You had no choice but to order the murder of the people it was your duty to protect?” Paul asked quietly. There was a faint clinking of armor from the direction of the soldiers on guard. Konrad let out a small, anguished sob, and his whole body shook.

“Y-Yes, Your Grace. I... I didn’t want to do it. It was all... I had no choice...” His earlier talkativeness was gone now. Instead his voice grew smaller and smaller until at last he lapsed into silence. This, more than anything else, betrayed his guilty conscience. Paul sighed, then slowly raised a hand. The soldiers moved in around Konrad, training their spears on him.

“L-Lord Paul?! Wh-What are you—?!”

“Enough with the theatrics,” Paul cut him off. “I have neither time nor mercy enough to waste any more on you. I’ll leave the choice of the stake or the executioner’s block to you.”

“Do not be cruel, Your Grace, I beg you!” Konrad ranted. His face bloomed scarlet, and spittle flew from his mouth. “I told you, I never turned on Fernest out of choice! Should I have defied them and been cut down like a dog? Lord Paul!”

“That’s exactly what you should have done. You should have died and used your death to buy your people’s safety. That is what any self-respecting lord would have done. Instead, you rolled over and showed your belly to the empire to save your own skin, and what is more, you went along with the slaughter of your own innocent people. Any more words are wasted on a beast like you,” Paul said, disgusted. He then addressed the soldiers. “Throw him in a cell.”

“You can’t be serious?!” shrieked Konrad. “Why should I lay down my life for a bunch of filthy peasants?! My bloodline runs directly from the hero of Fernest, Tristan Windsome himself!”

“And I’m sure even now, the hero of Fernest, Tristan Windsome, is turning in his grave to know that his line is going to end having fallen so low,” Paul replied.

“Damn you! I wasn’t the only one, you know! All the others turned too! All

the lords went over to the empire! Don't try to pin this all on me!" Konrad howled, protesting at the injustice of being the only one to be punished.

This time, Otto replied instead. "Do not trouble yourself on that count," he said, his expression blank and his tone perfunctory. "We have already issued orders for the arrest of all the traitorous lords. They will be standing in your place soon enough."

Konrad went on railing desperately against his fate, but he struggled in vain. The soldiers beat him down until he was at last escorted from the room looking battered as an old rag.

Paul stared after him, then muttered to himself, "Deplorable... Too many fools these days confuse nobility with a right to absolute dominion."

"It is only the labor of the commoners that keeps the nobility alive," Otto agreed. "A simple axiom, but it seems one that Count Konrad failed to grasp."

"And now he's even dragged the name of the great Tristan Windsome through the dirt. He is beyond redemption." Paul spat, then heaved a deep sigh.

Konrad Windsome's death sentence was officially announced two days later. The public execution turned into a great occasion, with the common folk pouring in until Windsome Castle was full to bursting. Paul himself disliked the spectacle of public executions. He merely went through with it this time because it was the only way to appease the intractable resentment of the common folk.

As Konrad lay his head upon the block, the crowd threw stones at him along with every taunt and jeer under the sun. Konrad, it appeared, hadn't given up quite yet. Even as an incoming stone split his forehead open, he continued to beg Paul for his life.

"L-Lord Paul, please, I beg you, have mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy—!" His voice was tinged with madness as he repeated the plea over and over again, and his eyes glimmered as they roved wildly around.

Otto didn't even glance at him as he turned to Paul and announced, "My lord, preparations are complete."

“Then let it be done.” Paul gestured, and a hulking soldier in clanking armor mounted the platform. This was the executioner. He stood before the block and drew a longsword. Its well-honed blade caught the sun’s light and shone brightly. With that, the baying crowd at once fell silent. The only sound was Konrad’s now incoherent gibbering as everyone in attendance held their breath. The soldier raised the longsword slowly up above his head, held the stance for a moment, then swung. Konrad’s head fell into the basket with a thud, while a thunderous cheer rose up from the crowd.

“Otto, take care of the rest.”

“Yes, ser.”

Paul looked briefly into Konrad’s terror-stricken face, then left quickly. The cheering from the crowd went on and on, as though it would never end.

II

The Independent Cavalry Regiment finished mopping up the straggling imperial soldiers, then turned towards Windsome Castle. After their victory against the Crimson Knights, the soldiers were in high spirits. They could be heard excitedly discussing their pay, with laughing retorts not to blow it all on drink. There was only one member of the whole company looking glum.

How many sighs is that now? Claudia wondered as Olivia heaved yet another spectacular sigh. She sat astride the black horse on Claudia’s right, stroking its neck half-heartedly and staring blankly into space. The black horse, perhaps out of concern for its master, from time to time gave an encouraging whinny.

“Oh, thank you,” Olivia told it. “Don’t worry about me, though. You’re such a sweet horse, aren’t you, Comet? Here’s a present for you.” She reached into her bag, her hands restless, and pulled out a cookie.

When did she name the horse?! Claudia thought, incredulous. *And why does it get a cookie just for that!* She stared as Olivia sniffed at the cookie, then decided that, for future peace of mind, this was a moment where she ought to intervene.

“Major,” she said, “I hate to tell you this, but I don’t think horses—or rather,

Comet, here, eats cookies.”

“Don’t be silly,” Olivia replied, brushing her off.

Claudia took a breath, then tried again. “If you do want to give it something, perhaps some candied potato would be better?”

“But cookies are obviously better than candied potato,” Olivia said, adding as she held the cookie out to Comet that they didn’t even rot your teeth. Ashton, riding alongside the other two, stared despairingly at Olivia. Claudia knew exactly how he felt.

But then Comet ate the cookie. Without even a moment’s hesitation.

What is up with this horse? Claudia thought as she watched it crunch away on the cookie. She wasn’t especially knowledgeable about horses, but she was sure that horses were supposed to sniff their food before they decided whether it was edible. Comet, meanwhile, had immediately swallowed the cookie. She watched as Olivia and the horse stared into each other’s identical ebony eyes. The interaction had gone beyond sweet and was starting to feel a little creepy.

Wait, wait... I’m getting sidetracked, Claudia thought. It was no good wondering about Comet’s peculiarities all day. She turned back to Olivia, who was fiddling with her reins.

“Major,” she began, “I would really appreciate it if you’d just tell me why you’re so unhappy. It’s not something hard to talk to me about, is it?”

“No, nothing like that,” Olivia said, shaking her head firmly.

“Then what is it, ser? I just want to help you—it’s my duty to do so, as your aide.”

“Hm...” Olivia mumbled. There was a pause, then she began haltingly, “Well it’s just, Rosenmarie got away, right? Even though I *swore* I was going to kill her.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Claudia remembered how she had rushed to Olivia’s side on that day, and how Olivia had looked standing there amongst the scattered corpses, staring blankly up at the sky as the ebony blade in her hand dripped with blood. From then until now they had been tidying up the remains of the

defeated army. In the end, there had been no chance to go after Rosenmarie.

“So it’s all ruined!” Olivia said, shaking her head furiously before burying her face in her arms.

“What are you talking about?” Claudia demanded. She was probably speaking out of turn, but in this case, it felt justified, so completely and utterly did she not understand what Olivia was on about. “All right, so Supreme Commander Rosenmarie got away. That was only after you left her grievously wounded, was it not?”

“But I didn’t *kill* her,” Olivia grumbled. Claudia had never seen her look so dejected. Why she was so hung up on this one point, Claudia couldn’t fathom. Ashton kept throwing them furtive glances, apparently wondering about what they were talking about.

“All right,” Claudia conceded, “but that doesn’t alter the fact of our victory. We got the remnants of their army, and we liberated the region. There’s no reason to be depressed.”

Olivia absorbed this for a moment, then replied, “But what if Mr. Fish Face won’t let me into the library because I couldn’t kill Rosenmarie?”

For a moment, Claudia was lost for words. The reason for Olivia’s unhappiness now made perfect sense. She had convinced herself that she wouldn’t be able to get permission to enter the library just because Rosenmarie had survived. The corners of Claudia’s mouth twitched as she felt both relief over finally understanding what it was that troubled Olivia and exasperation that it was something so ridiculous. She forced herself to assume a serious expression.

“I have good news for you, Major,” she said. “Your achievements on the battlefield are already so incredible, you’re already practically a figure of legend, a he—” Claudia cut off with a cough of embarrassment. Olivia looked at her in confusion.

“A what?” she asked.

“Um, look, the point is,” Claudia rushed on, “when Mr. Fish Face hears about all your exploits, I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to provide a reference for you.”

“Really? Even though I didn’t kill Rosenmarie?” Olivia asked, her ebony eyes staring imploringly into Claudia’s. It was the first time Claudia had seen her look so defenseless. She actually looked like an ordinary girl.

“Really, ser. And even if Mr. Fish Face *does* try to say no...” Claudia began, as Neinhardt’s affected little smile floated up vividly in her mind.

“Then what?” Olivia prompted, swallowing loudly.

“Then *I* will make him change his mind, even if I have to hold a blade to his throat,” Claudia said, clapping a hand to her breast to emphasize to Olivia that there was nothing to worry about. She was perfectly resolved now that, even if she didn’t have a blade to hand, on the off chance Neinhardt tried to withhold his consent, she would grab him by the throat until he behaved. The fact that he outranked her was irrelevant.

“Claudia, will you really? Really, actually for real?” Olivia gasped, leaning out so far towards Claudia that their foreheads almost collided. Uncontainable joy seemed to radiate from every inch of her.

“B-Back off a bit!” Claudia spluttered. “Of course. As a knight, I would never go back on my word. It will depend on how the war goes from here, of course, but I’m sure we can get some time off. Then I’ll accompany you to the capital.”

“Got it! Oh, I know I can count on you, Claudia,” Olivia said, then leaned forward to hug Comet’s neck. “Did you hear that, Comet?” while cheerfully nuzzling the horse. Comet whinnied, then flicked its tail high through the air. Claudia watched the two of them with a smile, then realized Ashton was looking at her like he had something to say.

“Was there something you wanted to add?” she asked.

“Um,” he began hesitantly, “I just wondered if I could go with you. I know that as a commoner I can’t go into the library, of course...”

“Well, I don’t see any reason why not...” Claudia said, looking at Olivia.

“Huh?” she said, looking between them. “Obviously you’re coming too, Ashton! You’re going to use your local expertise to treat me to the best cake in the capital, right? Just like you promised back in Canalia.” She gave Ashton a sunny smile and added, “I haven’t forgotten!” as he tried to work out a

response.

“Th-That’s right, I did,” he said with a nervous laugh. “Got to make sure we get you all the best cake with that local expertise!” Claudia hadn’t forgotten that conversation either. A commoner wouldn’t normally be able to afford a luxury like cake, but now that Ashton was a warrant officer, it shouldn’t burn too much of a hole in his purse. She had to wonder, therefore, why his face had gone so stiff, and why his eyes were now flicking around guiltily.

That’s odd... Is he hiding something? she wondered. Just then, there was a gust of cold wind that brought with it a cloud of fine sand. Claudia held down her hair as the wind tried to catch it, looking around at the excessive commotion it had caused amongst the soldiers. In the distance, she saw that the peaks of the Esteria Mountains were dusted with white.

“That late in the year already...” she said.

“It’s just going to get colder and colder now,” Ashton agreed quickly. It was such an obvious attempt to change the subject that Claudia smiled.

“I hope we can get to the library before winter comes!” Olivia said. Her eyes didn’t see the scene in front of them. They were looking at something, somewhere, far away.

Epilogue: The Seraph

Four years had passed since Ramza, Emperor of Asvelt, declared his plan to unify Duvedirica.

As time passed, the conflict grew only fiercer, and Duvedirica began to seem as though it would be plunged into chaos. The smaller nations in the west of the continent were locked in an especially bloody struggle.

There was one nation, however, that had stood quietly apart from the beginning: the Holy Land of Mekia.

Mekia was governed by the Seraph, a title passed down through the female line since the nation's inception. The nation was known for its wealth, drawn from the rich deposits of minerals that were mined there. To the followers of the Goddess Strecia, it was revered as the holy land, for Mekia was home to the founding church of the Holy Illuminatus faith. Its population was approximately one million. It also possessed a fifty-thousand strong army: the Winged Crusaders.

The Cloudy Chamber at La Chaim Palace, Holy City of Elsphere

"They say that the Crimson Knights were defeated in battle. Can you confirm this?" asked Sofitia Hell Mekia. She sat upon a throne of stunning beauty, gazing down at her vassal, Thousand-Wing Amelia, who knelt before her.

"It is true, my Seraph," Amelia replied.

"So it was true..." Sofitia said softly. "Was it the work of the First Legion?" Sofitia knew the reputation of their commander—the invincible general, Cornelius vim Gruening. One needed only open a history book to find his name time and time again in accounts of past battles. She thought it likely thanks to the strength of Cornelius and the First Legion that the doomed Kingdom of Fernest had somehow managed to hold out this long.

But to her surprise, Amelia shook her head. "No, my Seraph. Not the First

Legion.”

“My goodness. Then who?”

“General Paul von Baltza of the Seventh Legion, or so the Owls tell me.”

The Owls were an elite unit of espionage agents, specializing in the gathering of intelligence. They worked throughout the continent, maintaining close relationships with Illuminatus Priests and others of the faith who held power. When it came to acquiring information, the owls were a step above the shimmers of the Imperial Intelligence Division.

“Paul von Baltza...” Sofitia said, thinking back to her past reading. “Ah yes, the ‘God of the Battlefield,’ was it not? The one they say slaughtered fifty warriors single-handedly.”

Amelia nodded, her face revealing nothing. “But it is a very strange tale, my Seraph. If the Seventh Legion possessed the strength to defeat the Crimson Knights, I wonder how it was that Fernest was ever forced into their current dire predicament.”

Sofitia also found the story doubtful. Fernest’s greatest stronghold, Kier Fortress, had fallen under the empire’s control, and the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Legions were all but wiped out of existence. She had also heard that the economic blockade imposed by the United City-States of Sutherland, the jewel of the south, had left them lacking adequate resources to wage their war. Reports indicated that the kingdom wielded less than half the political authority it had before the advent of the war. If through all that time the Seventh Legion had been active in the conflict, the situation ought to look very different.

Amelia answered Sofitia’s doubts without hesitation. “A careful analysis of the intelligence we received indicated that a young girl they call the ‘Death God’ has been responsible for much of their recent success,” she said. “It appears this girl volunteered for service in the Seventh Legion about a year ago.”

“The God of the Battlefield has found a death god to succeed him?” Sofitia said with an airy laugh, then continued, “What a lot of deities there seem to be in this Seventh Legion. It must be very merry indeed.”

Amelia shifted slightly where she knelt. In the Holy Land of Mekia, they

worshipped the Goddess Strecia as the creator and one true god. It made her uncomfortable hearing about gods of the battlefield and death gods, even if they were only nicknames.

“The Lady Berlietta, commander of the Crimson Knights, was also grievously wounded,” she continued. “We believe that this, too, was the work of the death god.”

“Oh, dear! This little death god must be a rather exceptional warrior to best Lady Berlietta...” Sofitia exclaimed. “I would have much preferred it if she had done us the courtesy of dying properly, though. Don’t you agree, Amelia?” she inquired with a breezy smile. Amelia nodded without a word.

“I thought you would. Well, it is a shame, but this still presents us with a rather wonderful opportunity. We would be remiss not to put it to good use.”

There was no doubt that the death god girl was a significant source of trouble for the empire, like a small tumor in its giant body. It might be small, but before long it would spread everywhere.

Sofitia’s plan was to wait and see how things played out, rather than making any clumsy attempts to interfere with the death god. That was what was best for Mekia. After all, Fernest had come back from the brink of death. She needed them to keep fighting the empire for her, even if they had to crawl. It was still too soon.

Privately, Sofitia was jubilant.

“Amelia,” she said, “tell me the current state of the Crimson Knights.”

“They have retreated all the way back to Fernest’s northern border, to the outland castle known as Fort Astora. Lady Berlietta has returned to Orsted to receive treatment.”

“How many soldiers does Fort Astora have?”

“Around ten thousand, my Seraph.”

“Thank you...” said Sofitia. “Defeat is a new experience for the Crimson Knights. And with Lady Berlietta absent, I imagine those stationed at Fort Astora cannot feel terribly secure.” She stood up from her throne, then beat the silver

staff in her hand on the floor. A clear tone rang out like a bell through the Cloudy Chamber.

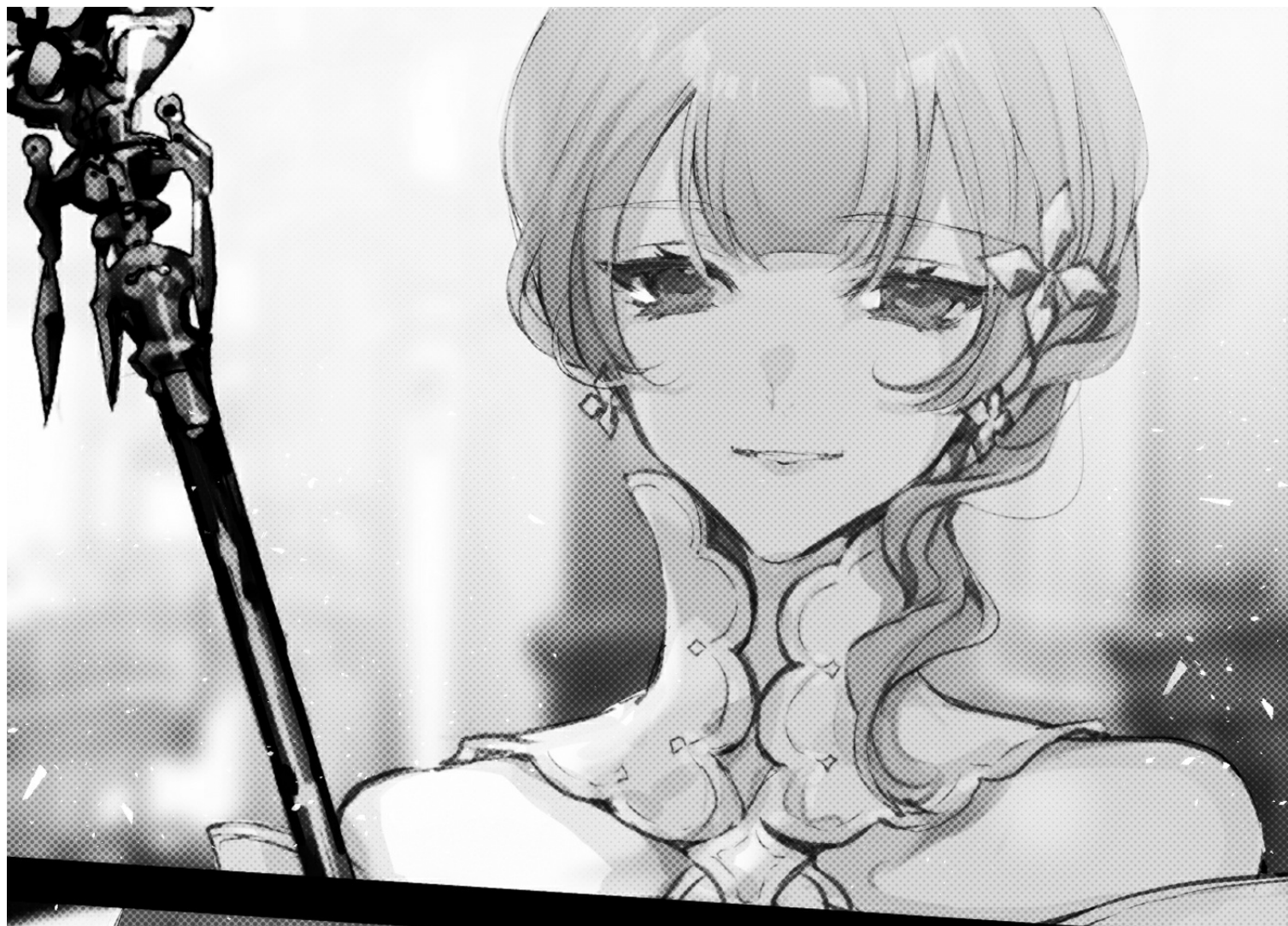
“Thousand-Wing Amelia Stolast. You will take three thousand gatekeepers and pay our allies a *sympathy visit*. This I order you to do as your Seraph, Sofitia Hell Mekia.”

“Your wish is my command,” Amelia replied, lowering her head in deference. Sofitia walked softly down to her. She faced Amelia, gazing at the other woman’s long, pale blue hair, then gently took her left hand into which was tattooed the cerulean mage circle.

“You need not hold back against the Crimson Knights,” Sofitia said. “Show them the full might of the mages. May the blessings of Strecia go with you.” She smiled at Amelia with the gentle smile that the common folk so adored they dubbed it “the joy of the goddess.”

Amelia looked up slowly, revealing the grotesque grin that stretched across her face.

She is truly such a lovely girl, thought Sofitia.



Afterword

After heavy revisions, *Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 2* is complete, though I have to say, I despaired at how slowly I write... I know very well that it's all my own fault for not planning things out properly, but I'm afraid that I, Ayamine, just don't like plotting. When I plan the plot out, I get kind of obsessive about not deviating from my plan, and it ends up being that even when I have a good idea partway through, it takes me ages to be able to work it in (for all that this sounds very defensive, I hope you will take it in good humor).

I do, of course, have the broad outline of the story in my head, including how it ends, but no more than that. I myself am writing with bated breath, waiting to see just what Olivia will pull off next.

Now, some acknowledgments.

My editor, Higuchi-sama. I'm sorry this manuscript was so late. I know it was because I kept revising until even I was fed up with my own obstinance, but that isn't going to stop. Next, to the illustrator, Cierra-sama, who once again provided the gorgeous illustrations. You totally bowled me over. I am truly in awe.

And to my readers, I offer as many thanks as there are stars in the sky.

Maito Ayamine

Death's DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE



◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA

II

Their swords clashed together over and over, until Olivia struck down with a diagonal slash. Rosenmarie twisted to avoid the blade, simultaneously throwing a powerful kick at Olivia's stomach. Olivia stepped back swiftly, sending up a cloud of dust as she responded in kind with a kick of her own. Their legs slammed together in mid-air.

Rosenmarie
von Berlietta

Olivia
Valedstorm

Holy Land of Mekia

Amelia shifted slightly where she knelt. In the Holy Land of Mekia, they worshipped the Goddess Strecia as the creator and one true god. It made her uncomfortable hearing about gods of the battlefield and death gods, even if they were only nicknames.

"What a lot of deities there seem to be in this Seventh Legion. It must be very merry, indeed."

Amelia Strast

Sofitia Hell-Mekia

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUSTRATION
CIERRA

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

II



Bonus Short Stories

A Second Day with Olivia and Claudia

The Mess Hall at Galia Fortress

Claudia chuckled to herself. “The major’s going to be surprised when she sees this,” she muttered, looking at the plates of food laid out before her and giving an approving nod. The grandfather clock had just struck the hour, which meant she would soon arrive. Claudia couldn’t restrain her glee.

“Claudia? What are you doing in the kitchen? And in that outfit?” Olivia arrived just as Claudia had planned, her eyes widening as she saw Claudia. Coming out from the kitchen, Claudia plucked at the hem of her apron to show Olivia.

“What do you think, ser? Does it suit me?”

“Um, sure, you look nice... But seriously, what are you doing?” Olivia asked. Even as she complimented Claudia, the caution in her eyes was plain to see.

“As you always do so much for me, Major, today I thought I would make you dinner.”

“No way! *You* cooked?” Olivia exclaimed loudly. It seemed she found this quite shocking.

“Major, I *am* still a woman,” Claudia pointed out.

“Yeah, I know that...” Olivia replied. “But don’t nobles always have cooks on staff?”

“That is correct, Major, and the Jung family does keep a cook. That does not, however, mean that we don’t cook.”

“Huh, you don’t say?” Olivia sounded amazed.

“But anyway, none of that is important right now,” Claudia said briskly. “Please eat up, Major, or all the food I made will get cold.”

She steered Olivia forcefully into a chair, then brought out plate after plate of food. She was sure that Olivia would be pleased, and watched expectantly. Olivia didn't disappoint, staring so hard at the food she could have bored a hole in it. Claudia was delighted.

"Don't feel you have to be polite, Major, eat up! Oh, and there's more, of course. You can eat as much as you like," she said, then spread her arms theatrically, and turned towards the kitchen. That was when she noticed the cooks watching her. They all averted their eyes.

Eh? What's with them? Claudia thought, perplexed by their attitudes.

Olivia, sounding a little hesitant, asked, "Um, so, Claudia. What exactly is this?"

"This?" Claudia replied, looking at the dish Olivia had indicated. "Well, this is grilled fish. It's a river species called dada—it's in season at the moment."

"O-Oh. And... And this?"

"That is roasted gray fox with an aromatic sauce of stewed mixed fruit. It's delicious," Claudia replied. Olivia went on asking questions, apparently having taken a great interest in Claudia's cooking. Claudia answered each one in detail.

Finally, Olivia asked, "Um, Claudia? Can I ask one more question?"

"Anything you want to know."

"Why is it all black? And did you happen to taste any of it?" Olivia asked with a little laugh. Claudia looked again at her cooking and had to admit that it did look a little blackened. But it was unavoidable that things charred when you cooked over fire.

"That's because it was grilled, for the most part. It's normal for the outside to char a little."

"O-Oh, hm. A little..." Olivia said. "So did you taste it?"

"Taste? Of course not. I used only the freshest ingredients, ser. Of course it will be delicious. Now, hurry up and try it!" Claudia said, then sat down in front of Olivia with a wide smile.

“Um, right. Okay...” Olivia said. She then took several deep breaths, then tentatively began to eat. Partway through, tears began to well up in her eyes. Claudia, thinking she must have been moved by the scrumptious flavors, pledged to herself that next time she would make something even better.

At last, Olivia polished off the last scrap on her plate and said, “Mm, mmm... Thank you, Claudia.” She stood up unsteadily.

“What?!” Claudia exclaimed. “Are you done already? There’s enough for seconds, remember?”

“O-Oh, no, I’m really full,” Olivia said, putting a hand to her stomach with a pained expression. Claudia had never thought the day would come that she heard Olivia claiming to be full. From the thin sheen of sweat on Olivia’s face, however, she guessed that this was not the only reason.

“Is your stomach upset, ser?” she asked. Olivia gave a weak nod.

“Y-Yeah. I felt great until just before, I don’t know what happened...” she trailed off with a half-hearted laugh.

“That won’t do at all...” Claudia said. “All right, I know what to do. You can come back and finish the rest once you feel better. Wait here a moment—I’ll ask whether it’ll keep.” Claudia hurried to the kitchen. She explained the situation to the cooks who assured her through a too-bright smile that it would be no trouble.

“They say they can keep it for you, Major,” Claudia said, looking back over her shoulder with a smile, only to find that Olivia was nowhere to be seen.

A Second Day with Olivia and Ashton

Ashton’s room at Galia Fortress

Olivia burst into Ashton’s room and went right up to him where he lay in bed reading a book. “Ashton, I’m going to look for ghosts!” she announced, her eyes sparkling.

“You can’t just barge in without knocking,” he said. “And ghosts, of all things? That’s stupid.” Ashton rolled his eyes, but Olivia, not to be outdone, rolled her

eyes right back.

“You mean you haven’t heard about the ghost in the armory?”

“What? No, that rumor’s everywhere, so of course I’ve heard it,” Ashton replied. He closed his book and slowly sat up.

The rumors had started a week earlier, when a soldier patrolling the armory said they’d heard a woman’s wailing voice in the middle of the night. The other soldiers had sneered at the story until one, then another caused a ruckus when they claimed to hear the same voice. Now, many were apparently refusing night patrol duty.

“In that case, hurry up and let’s go!” Olivia said. She grinned and yanked on his arm, but Ashton slid out of her grip.

“‘In that case’?” he said. “What’s that supposed to mean? Why do I have to go with you, anyway?” The clock on the wall showed that it was already eleven. Certainly if a ghost were going to appear, this was the perfect time for it. At the same time, he wasn’t such a people pleaser as to get sucked into a hunt for an invisible ghost, nor did he have the energy. He had another grueling day with Otto waiting for him in the morning.

“*Because,*” Olivia replied, pouting, “for one thing, Claudia says there’s no way she’ll come with me.” Ashton was a little surprised by this. For all Claudia grumbled, she was soft on Olivia, and it was rare for her to refuse. He wondered if her job as aide kept her busy.

“So then you came to get me?”

“Yep. So let’s *go.*”

“Take this as my firm rejection. I don’t care about ghosts.”

Olivia looked at him for a moment, then said, “Does that mean you’re scared of ghosts too, Ashton?”

Averting his eyes, Ashton replied, “I-I’m not scared. How stupid would you have to be to fear something you can’t even see?” He trailed off in an unconvincing laugh.

“Okay, so let’s go.”

“Listen, I told you I don’t care about ghost hunt—”

“Please come,” Olivia said. She leaned towards him, her face forlorn.

That’s not playing fair at all, thought Ashton as he reluctantly got up from the bed.

“All righty then, where’s this ghost?” Olivia skipped along cheerfully, holding a lamp out to light their way. There was, of course, no sign of anyone else, and it felt as though he might be crushed under the weight of the darkness. Ashton held up his own lamp to look around when suddenly, there was a clatter from behind them. A tiny scream escaped him, making Olivia double up with laughter at the pathetic sound.

Ashton, feeling that for the sake of his honor he had to say something, explained, “I-I’m not scared or anything. Anyone would jump at a noise out of nowhere like that.”

“I didn’t,” Olivia pointed out.

“That’s because you’re special,” he began, but Olivia cut him off.

“Wait,” she said, holding a hand up to her ear. “I hear something. It sounds like a woman crying.” She pointed the lamp in her right hand towards a corner of the armory.

“I-I never even believed...”

“Huh?” Olivia said, stopping in her tracks and tilting her head to one side. “That’s weird...”

“Wh-What’s weird?” Ashton shook Olivia’s shoulder.

“It’s just,” she said, “I just suddenly felt this aura from behind you...” She turned around, then her eyes went wide and she cried, “Whoa! It’s really here!” Ashton knew that, for better or for worse, Olivia didn’t lie. Which meant he knew exactly what she must be talking about. He knew he shouldn’t look, but that most infernal quality, curiosity, took over and made him turn his head.

“Aaagh!” he cried. There stood a woman with her head half-severed, her mouth stretched across her face in a curve like a crescent moon. Ashton looked

into her staring, mismatched eyes, and fell down in a faint, bubbles trickling from his mouth.

Some days later, Ashton could be heard loudly proclaiming to anyone that would listen that the ghost was real.

A Day with Olivia and Gauss

The Emaleid Citadel

Late one night, as Olivia hummed to herself while wandering the streets of the citadel, she heard a voice from around a corner turning onto a narrow lane. Mildly surprised a human other than herself was out walking, she peeked around.

“Oh, you’re all just the cutest. Eat up, go on!” There, stroking a pack of kittens and looking smitten, was Gauss.

“Wow, you like cats?” Olivia asked, peering over his shoulder. Gauss jumped so badly it was funny to watch.

“Captain! I wondered who’d be out at this time of night...” Gauss replied. “Could you not sneak up behind me like that? You almost gave me a heart attack.” He made a show of rubbing his chest.

“It’s not like I did it on purpose...” Olivia said. “But Gauss, you like cats?” she repeated.

“C-Cats?” Gauss replied, his eyes darting around wildly. “Whatever are you talking about, ser?”

“I mean, those kitties that are rubbing themselves against your legs?” Olivia pointed at Gauss’s feet. They looked unmistakably like kittens to her, but she wondered if perhaps they looked like some other animal to Gauss. He looked down at them as though he’d only just noticed they were there.

“Huh! Where’d these rascals come from, all of a sudden?” he said. He tried to shoo them away with his hand, but the kittens ignored him, continuing to weave around his feet while meowing sweetly.

Olivia watched this for a moment, then said, “You were giving them bread, right?”

“What, this? Uh, this is for me! I fancied a snack.” Gauss hastily shoved the remaining bread into his mouth, then started coughing furiously like it had stuck in his throat.

Olivia, while patting him on the back, asked, “Do you not want anyone knowing that you like kitties?”

“I... I don’t...” Gauss mumbled, looking guiltily at her. Olivia was utterly bemused by his behavior, but she knew that there were lots of humans who couldn’t talk about the things they liked. Claudia, for example, definitely liked cute soft toys, but she vehemently denied it any time it was pointed out. Olivia thought she had a pretty good grip on the human psyche by now, but it seemed she still had a way to go. *You really do never stop learning, just like Z told me*, she thought.

“Come on, ser,” Gauss continued, “A big, rugged man like me getting gooey over kittens? That’d just be weird.”

“I mean, I don’t think it’s weird at all.”

“Thanks for that, Captain, but I’ve got a lot of rough types under my command and if they saw me like this, I’d be a laughingstock. It’d ruin my reputation.”

“Really?” Olivia replied, gently stroking the kittens that came to rub themselves against her. “I like kitties too. Does that mean if everyone knew that it’d ruin *my* reputation?” She wasn’t sure if she had this so-called reputation in the first place, but figured it was best to find out everything she could. For future reference.

“In your case, Captain, it doesn’t matter what anyone knows about you. You’re operating on a different level,” Gauss replied, his face twitching a little. Olivia wanted to know what he meant by “a different level,” but for some reason, though she really wasn’t sure what it was, she decided not to ask.

“Huh. Well, I’m going to continue with my walk now,” she said, then made to leave. Gauss called hesitantly after her.

“Captain, please keep what you saw between us.”

“Okay, got it.” She waved back over her shoulder, then walked off.

The following day, as Gauss ate breakfast, a smirking soldier came over to him.

“Hey, guess what I saw last night,” he said. “Sergeant Major Gauss, feeding a bunch of kittens! Even the tough guys have their soft—” Before he could finish, Gauss’s fist sent him flying spectacularly across the mess hall.

Olivia, watching this, pulled a pen and a notebook marked *Human Observation* from her pocket, and added a new line.

Silence is golden.

A Second Day with Olivia and Paul

The command room at Windsome Castle

Paul was wrestling with a stack of paperwork when there was an unexpected knock on the door. He looked at the clock and saw that the hour hand pointed at two o’clock.

How odd. I could’ve sworn I didn’t have any appointments now... he thought, but called out to give the knocker permission to enter. The next moment, the door flew open to reveal a young girl with silver hair, grinning to reveal pearly white teeth. Paul broke into a warm smile.

“Major Olivia! What brings you here out of the blue?” He offered her a seat on the sofa, which she accepted without so much as a salute, then produced a torn-out sheet of paper and placed it on the table. Paul looked at it and saw written there in a hand far more elegant than he’d have expected of a young girl, the words *Application for Leave*.

“You want some time off, Major?” he asked.

“Yes, ser,” she replied. “I really, really want it.” Paul, who had expected demands for cake, felt a little put out. He did, of course, allow for holidays, if irregularly. That she’d come here specially to ask for it, however, suggested to

him that she wanted to ask for a longer period of leave.

“The northern lands have settled down now, so I can spare a week for you...”

“A whole week? Seriously?” Olivia gasped, jumping forwards and pushing her face towards him. He patted her gently on the shoulder, then gestured for her to sit down again.

“Well, you went so far as to fill out a leave application, so I’m sure there must be a reason?”

The Crimson Knights had withdrawn, and the Seventh Legion now controlled all the northern lands. While they couldn’t relax yet, Paul didn’t expect another attack for a while at least. Under the current circumstances, a week-long holiday was nothing. More than anything else, he didn’t want to have to turn down the request of this innocent young girl.

“Thanks!” Olivia said, then quickly added, “I mean, thanks, General Paul.” She saluted, beaming at him, then promptly turned to leave.

“Major,” Paul asked, “may I ask where you plan to go on your holiday?”

“The Royal Library!” she replied, turning back to give him a thumbs-up.

“The Royal Library?” Paul exclaimed. “Have you found someone to be your reference? If not, I—”

“I asked Mr. Fish Face—um, I mean, Brigadier General Neinhardt to be my reference!” Olivia said, then left the command room with a spring in her step.

She asked Brigadier General Neinhardt? I bet Lieutenant Claudia has something to do with that... Paul mused. But why did she call him Mr. Fish Face? He doesn’t look particularly fishy...

He sat for a while, his paperwork forgotten, occupied by the image of Neinhardt’s face.

A Second Day with Olivia and Otto

Galia Fortress

Otto, patrolling the corridors of the fortress, noticed Olivia in a corner of the

fortress garden wielding a hoe with great enthusiasm. He found the sight of her with something other than a weapon in hand quite refreshing.

“Major Olivia, I thought you were due to go out and meet the enemy soon,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Colonel Otto. I’m going to plant some flowers,” she explained. She wiped away her sweat with the towel around her neck, then flashed him a toothy smile. Otto looked down and saw that the ground was neatly plowed. He was fairly sure he hadn’t given permission for flowers to be planted in the fortress garden, but right now he mostly felt surprised by Olivia’s behavior.

“I never imagined you were interested in flowers,” he remarked.

“Really, ser?” Olivia said, cocking her head, before immediately going back to swinging her hoe.

“Did you happen to get permission to plant flower seeds here?” Otto inquired. “I’m quite sure I didn’t give it to you.”

“Permission? Yes, I got permission from General Paul.”

“From Lord Paul?”

“Yes, ser. He told me to plant as many as I like,” Olivia said. Otto frowned.

I don’t know... he thought. Lord Paul is too soft on her, as usual. She never tries to improve, no matter how many warnings I give her. I’m at quite a loss for what to do with her. He had a mind to take his complaint to Paul himself, but unfortunately the general was away. Now that Olivia had permission from the supreme commander of the fortress himself, even Otto couldn’t stop her. Though he never brought it up, he was sure the girl must also be a real pain in the neck for Claudia too.

“Provided Lord Paul has issued his permission, I shall say nothing more about it. Might I ask, however, what kind of flowers you are planting?” If she was going to plant seeds, he thought, a whole variety would be ideal. When they bloomed it would add a bit of color to the stark interior of the fortress. He was just thinking that Olivia’s idea might not be such a bad one when she declared that she was only sowing raspberia.

“Why only have raspberia seeds?” he demanded. Raspberia, with its pale purple and yellow petals, was undeniably a beautifully delicate flower, but there were plenty of other beautiful blossoms. Otto didn’t understand why she would limit herself only to raspberia.

In response to his question, Olivia put down her hoe, then looked at him with utter bewilderment.

“Huh? Obviously raspberia flowers taste the best,” she replied. Otto spent a moment wondering if his hearing had failed him. Just when he thought Olivia had a fondness for flowers like a proper young girl, she revealed that she meant to *eat* them? It beggared belief. He cursed himself for a fool for allowing himself to be impressed even for a moment.

“However gluttonous you may be, surely there’s no call for eating flowers,” he protested. “We certainly pay you enough.”

“Eat them?” Olivia exclaimed, before doubling up with laughter. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to eat them.” Watching her, Otto thought of how it was said that girls of a certain age laughed at the drop of a hat. It seemed even Olivia, despite lacking all other social graces, was no exception.

“You’re forgetting your manners, Major,” Otto warned her. “But more to the point, was it just my imagination that I heard you say raspberia flowers taste the best just now?”

“No, I did say that,” Olivia said, then added, “*ser*.”

“Well, then.”

“It’s the nectar that tastes good, *ser*,” she said. “Ashton said that mixing it into his mustard would add, like, depth? To the flavors. So I’m growing raspberia flowers because they have the sweetest nectar, and then Ashton will make me lots and lots of delicious mustard.” Olivia, her expression dreamy, went back to swinging her hoe again. It appeared to Otto that there was a renewed intensity to her work. He also noted that, by the sounds of it, it wasn’t just Claudia Olivia was tormenting, but Ashton as well. He didn’t intend to cut Ashton any slack in his tutelage just because of that, however.

“Your mission is fast approaching,” he reminded her. “Don’t get too carried

away.”

“Yes, ser,” she replied, prolonging each syllable. *No discipline at all*, Otto thought. He heaved a sigh, then left the garden.

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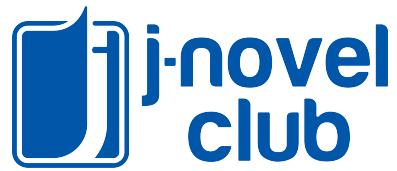
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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 2

by Maito Ayamine

Sylvia Gallagher Edited by Ori Starling

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